FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR ARISE ZHANG, ALSO KNOWN AS
FEI TIAN YE XIANG
Book
1
DINGHAI
FUSHENG
RECORDS

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DINGHAI FUSHENG RECORDS

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The
DIVINE LAND
Yin
Mountains
CHANG'AN
XIANGYANG
Longzhong
Mountain
MAI CITY
Yangtze
River
JIANGNAN
北
西
東
南

DINGHAI FUSHENG RECORDS

1

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Seven Seas Entertainment

DINGHAI FUSHENG RECORDS (NOVEL) VOL. 1

Published originally under the title of《定海浮生錄》by 非天夜翔 Fei Tian Ye Xiang
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Regular Edition: 979-8-89373-391-4
Special Edition: 979-8-89373-558-1
Printed in Canada
First Printing: May 2025
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter 1

JIN DYNASTY. Fourth year of the Taiyuan[1] period, first day of the Second Lunar Month, Xiangyang.

A sudden snowstorm swept through the ancient city overnight. The wave of cold froze the few remaining warm lights; the only sounds left behind were the rustling of snow and the crackling of charcoal in stoves.

Outside the city, two hundred thousand Qin troops surrounded Xiangyang, waiting for the final battle against the Jin defenders.

Chen Xing had been clueless about the city's affairs, and now he felt quite anxious. He could have arrived at any other time, so why had he chosen to come now? It had taken all his effort to somehow muddle his way into Xiangyang City, and now he had to look for someone inside the city—which was like trying to find a needle in a haystack! Even if he did find the one he was looking for, how was he supposed to get out of the city by morning?

Xiangyang City had been under siege for a full year, and its ammunition and provisions had long been exhausted. The foot soldiers were too hungry to fight and the civilians too weak to flee, yet they all still had the energy to curse. Tensions were running high and people were causing disturbances everywhere.

Once he found his way in, it was no easy task for Chen Xing to locate Zhu Xu, the Governor of Liangzhou the one who was in charge of defending the city. He made his identity known to the governor, but before he could explain his purpose for coming here, Zhu Xu had already summoned all the military counselors and generals under his command. In an instant, the hall was filled with people, some standing and some sitting as they waited for Chen Xing to speak.

"Repeat it once more, in front of everyone. What are you?" Zhu Xu asked.

Dressed in a black robe, Chen Xing sat upright before him. He answered earnestly, “E-x, *ex*, o-r, *or*, cist.”

“He said he’s a mage,” Zhu Xu said to the crowd.

“Not a mage,” Chen Xing explained patiently, “I’m an exorcist. That’s the third time I’ve said it.”

The resplendent lights in the main hall of the governor’s manor cast a luminous glow over Chen Xing, accentuating his features. He was dressed entirely in black, a striking contrast against his fair complexion. Draped in an intricately patterned Han brocade robe, he had a tiny medicine bag strung at his waist and cloud-wading boots gracing his feet, and he held a small, gold-plated hand warmer. His eyes were covered with a black cloth that revealed only his rosy lips and high nose bridge—he was blind.

“Let me introduce myself,” the young man continued. “My name is Chen Xing, the 481st successor of the Divine Land’s exorcists and the only Great Exorcist left in this world. I’m sixteen years old this year, five foot eight, 143 pounds. I’m from Hanzhong, and I’m also the inheritor of the exorcists’ great undertaking in the human world. I came to Xiangyang on official business, and I hope to obtain Zhu Xu-daren’s assistance. Here, please take a look. This is a document issued by the Great Jin’s Minister of Appointments, Xie-daren—Xie An.”

In the crowded governor’s manor, the counselors whispered among themselves, and the generals under Zhu Xu’s command eyed the uninvited guest with suspicion.

“Xie-daren?” The handwritten order was passed around the crowd. “Where are the reinforcements?” Zhu Xu demanded. He could barely contain his frustration. “I asked Xie An for reinforcements, and he sent me a mage? What’s the meaning of this?”

“Well, I don’t know about any of that,” said Chen Xing sincerely. “And I’d like to reiterate once more—I’m not a mage.”

As the murmurs quieted, Governor Zhu Xu’s heart quickened, finally prompting him to voice the question that had long been weighing on his mind. “Can you help push back the huge army outside the city?”

Chen Xing scratched his neck, thinking. “It’s hard to say; that depends on the situation. But it’s most likely impossible.”

“Exorcist.” One of the generals who had just been observing until now spoke. “Can you scatter beans and turn them into an army?”

“No,” Chen Xing replied.

“Have you ever divined through the stars?” Zhu Xu asked. “Can you command the wind and rain to help everyone in Xiangyang out of this dire predicament?”

Chen Xing was speechless. He pointed at his blindfold. They wanted him to divine through the stars? How was he supposed to do that if he couldn’t see them?

“Kid!” another general chimed in. “Do you know any magic? Can you perform some kind of magic trick? Even if it’s just for show, it doesn’t matter! If you do it in front of the people, it’ll give everyone the confidence to defend the city!”

“Scattering beans to create an army is just something written in books to deceive people,” said Chen Xing innocently. “There’s no such magic in the world. Well, at least not yet.”

Governor Zhu Xu let out a sigh, as did everyone else in the hall. Their disappointment was palpable.

“Lord Governor,” Chen Xing said, “the purpose of my trip here is to find someone.”

The crowd in the hall started to disperse. Zhu Xu, who thought he had finally been thrown a lifeline, asked insipidly, “Who is it?”

“A person destined for me,” Chen Xing replied seriously. “My Protector Martial God is in Xiangyang City. This person is extremely important, not just to me, but also to the entire world.”

Zhu Xu looked at Chen Xing doubtfully.

“This destined person has appeared three times in my dreams,” Chen Xing explained, “each clearer than the last. From my latest dream, I’m

certain that this person is in Xiangyang City. As long as I can find him, I'll —"

Zhu Xu felt like he had just seen a glimmer of hope, and his heart flew to his throat. "You'll help us break through the Qin army?"

"No… I'll leave without delay," said Chen Xing earnestly. "Everyone's really busy, I dare not hold you up from fighting your war."

Zhu Xu couldn't bring himself to reply.

"Please gather all of the city's able-bodied men in one place," Chen Xing continued. "For my evaluation…for me to seek out my Protector Martial God. I assure you that this matter is of great concern to the millennial well-being of the Divine Land.[2] You will not regret it."

Zhu Xu wanted to ask, *What kind of joke is this?* This young man didn't seem to be lying, though. If this truly was some kind of prank, there would have been no need for him to venture into the city during its most perilous hour. To be frank, Zhu Xu didn't know how he'd managed to infiltrate the city in the first place. Perhaps it was because he would be on his last legs in a few more days, or maybe the phrase "millennial well-being" had struck a chord with him, but regardless, hope was growing fainter by the day. At the very least, he had a document from the Ministry in his hands. Zhu Xu suddenly found himself struck with an idea—he wanted to discern the true intentions behind the young man's mysterious actions.

"All the able-bodied men are in the army," Zhu Xu said coldly. "Look for him there, and we'll talk again once you've found him."

Two hours later, the remaining 12,200 officers and soldiers in the city were called over and assembled urgently on the field outside the governor's manor. Many were even yawning.

Snow fell lightly at dusk. A couch had been placed at the manor's entrance, and Chen Xing sat on it, looking down at the dense, dark mass of people below. There were spirited discussions happening down there. People had been in want of food since the beginning of winter—several months now. As soon as the army gathered, it was as if they had found an outlet to vent their frustration, and they all started clamoring at once.

“Silence! Silence!” the chief general commanded in a loud voice.

Seeing the situation turn dire, Zhu Xu realized that a riot was imminent if things continued like this. “Start now,” he urged.

Chen Xing was speechless. He raised his hand slightly, and it trembled a little before he finally put it back down. A military counselor from the governor’s manor noticed this small detail. “You seem to be a little nervous,” he said softly.

Chen Xing immediately refuted this allegation that harbored evil intentions. “I’m not nervous at all.” *Not among these people.*

Chen Xing waited for a long time, but the guidance he expected never appeared. He listened carefully, but within that endless darkness, only the rustling of the snow could be heard. *Heart Lamp, quickly…tell me where the Protector Martial God is. I’m running out of time!*

The clamor intensified. The soldiers below grew increasingly furious, their curses filling the air, and some had even begun demanding provisions. Suddenly, in the darkness within the blindfold, a distant light appeared.

Found him! Chen Xing got up at once and hastened toward that light.

“Hey! Hey!” exclaimed the generals stationed beside Zhu Xu. “Where are you going?!”

Chen Xing briskly passed through the first row of soldiers, heading toward the eastern side of the training ground, so Zhu Xu had no choice but to make his way down the stairs and follow suit. Soon, the generals started dispersing the soldiers, urging them to return to their posts. The crowd realized that they had been involved in yet another farce. Everyone sighed in frustration and cursed out loud before heading home.

After he left the field, Chen Xing turned in the direction of the governor’s manor. He looked every which way before making his way to the west side of the manor. “What is this place?” he asked.

Zhu Xu and a group of soldiers caught up with him. They lifted lit torches to look at Chen Xing.

“The dungeon,” said Zhu Xu.

A white light suddenly appeared in front of him. It was even nearer now.

“Open the door,” Chen Xing said seriously.

A general wanted to stop him—“You can’t go in! Inside is…”—but Zhu Xu motioned for someone to open the door.

Chen Xing, still blindfolded, proceeded through the underground passages of the governor’s mansion, illuminated by flickering oil lamps. He made a turn and headed straight for the deepest part of the dungeon. Before him, the guiding light pulsed occasionally, like a heartbeat. At times the room was bathed in brilliant light, while at others it plunged into complete darkness, with only occasional flickers emanating from deep within the cell.

In the depths of the dungeon, the cells on both sides were filled with eerie white bones and the mournful cries of prisoners. At the end of the passageway, from within an iron cell, came a low, desperate groan akin to that of a dying, trapped animal.

Chen Xing stopped right outside the last prison cell. He stood quietly behind the iron grille partition.

The prisoner, a man, was bound by iron chains and curled up on the ground. His entire body was bare, except for a tattered pair of shorts hanging around his waist. In front of him lay a moldy wooden basin, its contents long depleted. Evidently, he had not had food or water for several days. With the city under siege, survival was a challenge even for the good people of the city; who would tend to the needs of a prisoner?

The man’s unkempt, disheveled hair was loose and his ribs protruded from his emaciated frame. Whip marks could be seen all over his body, legs, and back. In this damp, moldy cell in the deepest reaches of the dungeon, he was so sick that he could barely breathe. Although he was half dead and lay curled up, it was still clear he had a tall stature. His face, however, was so grimy that it was impossible to make out his features.

“May I trouble you to please open the door?” Chen Xing asked.

“No!” the registrar objected. “Kid! You don’t know who this guy is! He can’t be let out!”

“The Heart Lamp chose him,” insisted Chen Xing.

“That’s fucking bullshit!” a general finally burst out, unable to contain himself. “Liar! Lord Governor, this man is a liar!”

But Zhu Xu wordlessly motioned for someone to open the prison door. Chen Xing walked into the cell and knelt before the prisoner. The man remained quiet and motionless. Then Chen Xing took off his blindfold, revealing a pair of clear eyes to observe the man.

The onlookers were stunned.

“Are you still alive?” Chen Xing asked him.

The man shut his eyes tightly. His forehead was boiling hot, yet he was so cold that his lips were tinged blue and he kept shivering uncontrollably. The nauseating stench of rust permeated the cell from the remnants of diarrhea. After days without sustenance, his body was on the brink of collapse, and he was already close to death. When Chen Xing poked him lightly, he flew into a sudden frenzy, gasping frantically.

Chen Xing dropped to one knee, unhesitating, and placed his hand on the man’s forehead. Soon the man opened his eyes, his lips trembling slightly, before finally he closed them and slipped into unconsciousness.

Chen Xing gestured to his left and right for the chains to be unlocked, then went to lift the man. But he soon realized that, even though he was so starved and sickly his emaciated body no longer resembled a human’s, the man was still extremely heavy. He was nearly seven feet tall. Chen Xing couldn’t lift him up easily, so he had no choice but to let part of his body drag across the ground…

He frowned at the others. “Give me a hand, won’t you?!”

Zhu Xu and the rest looked at Chen Xing with a puzzled expression.

“He was pretending to be blind!” the registrar exclaimed. “He was pretending! He really is a liar!”

Chapter 2

AFTER THE LENGTH OF TIME it would take for one incense stick to burn…

A huge quarrel over Chen Xing's identity had broken out in the governor's manor. One after another, people expressed that this young man's intentions were dubious and needed to be thoroughly investigated.

"The official document issued by Xie An is unlikely to be a fake!" said Zhu Xu. "What do you want me to do?"

"A single document isn't enough to justify taking a death row prisoner away!" a general said.

"He may be a spy sent into the city from outside!" another person accused. "Death row inmates are capable of committing all kinds of atrocities. Even if the city falls, we mustn't let them live!"

Gasping for breath, Chen Xing sat on the threshold of a guest room in the manor, having placed the sleeping man on a bed. He wiped his face, then went out to pour some water before retrieving a crimson pill from the medicine bag hanging at his waist. He attempted to pry the man's mouth open, but unfortunately, his teeth were clenched tightly, and between that and the constant quivering, Chen Xing could not feed him the medication. He pondered the problem for a long time; in the end, he had to resort to chewing the pill, drinking some cold water to dissolve it, pinching the man's jaw, then forcibly feeding him mouth-to-mouth.

Is it him? Chen Xing frowned as he studied the man's face and recalled what he had seen in his dream. Snow swirled everywhere in the City of Xiangyang, and the governor's manor stood right at the city's heart —there were no discrepancies. The Heart Lamp had flashed three times: first to lead him to the dungeon, the second in front of the dungeon, and the third when he had stepped into the cell in the deepest part of the dungeon.

“Who are you?” muttered Chen Xing as he wiped the unconscious man’s face. “Why did the Heart Lamp choose you?”

Just then, someone came to deliver a message that Zhu Xu wanted to see him. Chen Xing still hadn’t finished sorting things out, so he wanted to ask Zhu Xu to wait for a short while, but the messenger waited stubbornly outside the door. In the end, Chen Xing had no choice but to hurry out behind them.

The snow continued to fall. Zhu Xu stood on the third floor of the governor’s manor, overlooking the whole of Xiangyang. Chen Xing came up behind him and faced the city lights. In the distance, the music of a flute could be faintly made out, as if its player was weeping with sorrow.

“Explain it to me as clearly as possible,” Zhu Xu began. “Otherwise, I can’t let you take the prisoner away, whether you’re an ‘exorcist’ or not.”

Chen Xing studied Zhu Xu for a moment. “My lord,” he asked suddenly, “do you believe supernatural beings and monsters exist? Do you believe that I have magical powers? My hunch is that you actually don’t.”

Zhu Xu sighed. “My actions today were only for show, to stabilize the army’s morale,” he admitted. “Just tell me the truth. No more lies. Your real target is that prisoner, am I correct? Who asked you to take him away? It can’t be Xie An. Did the Hu people send you?”[3] His face grew sterner with each word. “Think before you speak. One wrong word and your head will roll. Even if this city falls tomorrow, I’m still the master of it today; I can behead you at any time.”

Chen Xing stared at the sword at Zhu Xu’s waist, then met his gaze. He knew that Zhu Xu had begun to sense that something was amiss—to other people, he was just a young man who played make-believe by acting mysterious. He had worn a black cloth over his eyes so that he could sense the Heart Lamp more acutely, not because he wanted to deceive anyone. Even Chen Xing himself had never expected the person he was looking for would turn out to be a prisoner on death row.

“Okay, I’ll tell you everything,” he said. “If you want to draw your sword, do it after I finish talking.”

Zhu Xu turned around and looked into Chen Xing's eyes. "Speak," he said coldly. "Let's see what kind of lie you can come up with!"

"If I start from the very beginning, it'll seriously leave you thinking, 'Life is too short for such a long story.' But since you insist on listening to it, Lord Governor, there's no harm in telling you. There *was* mana in the world…three hundred years ago."

Zhu Xu frowned a little. He hadn't expected Chen Xing to start by going on about that "magic" nonsense again.

"Three hundred years ago, the world was rife with yao,[4] mana, and practitioners of magic…" Chen Xing saw Zhu Xu's expression but pretended not to. He walked to one side and slowly began explaining.

That year, Emperor Zhang of the Han Dynasty was on the throne. General Ban Chao was sent to the Western Regions[5] on a diplomatic mission to settle a hundred-year policy. Everyone in the Divine Land lived a prosperous and content life; warriors, pill refiners, and fangshi—healers, diviners, alchemists, and astrologers—were all flourishing professions. According to legend, the so-called "yao tribes" were banished by powerful exorcists to a region with a hundred thousand massive mountains in the southwest of Yizhou and the country of Yelang. They laid down layers of enchantments to trap them there until they perished on their own, so that they could no longer meddle in the affairs of the Central Plains.

After the yao were exterminated, only one mission remained for humans: to seek immortality.

The fangshi believed that a person could live forever as long as they communicated with the heavens and earth, absorbed spiritual qi, and cultivated their magic. However, one day, all of the mana in the world suddenly disappeared.

With mana vanishing without forewarning, all the world's magical artifacts turned into scrap iron in the blink of an eye and the sacred treasures used to exorcise yao became ordinary, too. Incantations and magic lost their effectiveness, from strong magic that could move mountains and

fill seas to minor magic like calling on ghosts for good fortune. No matter how you tried to activate it, no magic would work anymore.

"Gone." Facing Zhu Xu, Chen Xing made an "all-gone" gesture. "Since then, there's been no mana in the Divine Land. This is what exorcists call the 'Silence of All Magic.'"

"Oh?" Zhu Xu's smile didn't reach his eyes. "So, what now?"

"Some say that the Xuan Gate that releases the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth has been closed," Chen Xing said regretfully.

Laozi had once said, "Reaching from the Mystery into the Deeper Mystery is the Gate to the Secret of All Life."[6] The people of that time thought that the world's spiritual qi was released from the invisible Xuan Gate in the void of the heavens. They believed that the disappearance of mana perhaps meant that the Xuan Gate had closed, and so they offered sacrifices to the sky and worshipped the mountains and rivers. They exhausted every means possible, but nothing worked.

Fortunately, the yao tribes didn't launch any large-scale insurrections. After all, in the years when exorcists had been active, the monsters had all been crippled. For new terrestrial and aerial beasts to cultivate into yao, they had to absorb spiritual qi from the heavens and earth; without spiritual qi, they naturally had no way of inciting trouble. If they used up yao energy to do bad things without parasitically consuming the energy of others, they'd be expending energy without sustenance. It would be a very tiring affair.

There were both pros and cons to the Silence of All Magic. Without monsters, there would naturally be no need for exorcists in the human world. The problem lay elsewhere: while yao could not cultivate, the same was not necessarily true for demons.

"Demons are the world's resentment incarnate," Chen Xing said. "Those who die under tragic circumstances will hold grudges. All things are

born in the heavens and will return to the earth; when a person enters the heavenly veins' saṃsāra after death, the resentment they leave behind can't be dispelled. To put it bluntly, the more people die during plagues, wars, and famines, the easier it is for resentment to gather."

During Emperor Hui's reign five hundred years ago, the imperial Sima family vied for the throne, and eight hundred thousand people died in the civil war. There were years of severe drought in the Guanzhong Plains, causing frequent famines, and more than two million people died of starvation and illness.

During the Yongjia period,[7] Liu Yuan, one of the Xiongnu people, broke through Huguan County and captured Luoyang, while Liu Yao breached Chang'an's defenses. In Guanzhong, Guanlong, and other places, nearly two million people died. The Jin people fled to the South toward Jiankang[8] but were wiped out by the Yangtze's natural moat.

Shi Le, of the Jie people, subdued Jinyang County and its province, injuring and killing more than two million people.

The Xianbei's Murong clan and the Jin general, Heng Wen, engaged in a colossal battle, killing four hundred thousand people. The Xianbei, Xiongnu, and Jie tribes wantonly plundered the Central Plains. They never brought provisions with them and considered the Han people "two-legged sheep" that could be used as military provisions along the way. When a census of the Central Plains had been conducted by the Jin Dynasty twenty years prior, it totaled to twenty million. By the time Ran Min[9] killed Jie Zhao, the population had to be recalculated: There were less than four million people left.

However, Ran Min's victory didn't last long. His city fell, and he was killed by the Murong clan. Jishou County was lost, and the people were slaughtered and had their possessions looted once again.

"Do the calculations and remove the remainder," Chen Xing told Zhu Xu. "Lord Governor, there are at least twenty million, more than ten million

of which are Han people who died under the cavalry of the Five Hu. Millions of Hu people murdered each other, too, which further exacerbated the birth of resentment."

Even though he was certain Chen Xing was lying, Zhu Xu fell into a trance as he listened. "The world is in turmoil, and a mortal life is as feeble as grass," he murmured.

"Let's trace this back to an even earlier time," Chen Xing continued, "when the Wei, Shu, and Wu families divided the land under the heavens. Endless wars surged during those hundred years, and the number of people who died because of those wars are in the tens of millions. Thus, in the past three hundred years, more than thirty million people have died in the Divine Land. The resentment of these thirty million people wandering between the heavens and earth, never leaving, has already far exceeded the limit that the Divine Land can accommodate. If it goes on like this, demons will be bred in just a few years. As for the birthing process, I've never seen it happen before, and historical records about it are scarce. Putting that aside for now, I'll discuss the key points. Someone has to be prepared in advance and remain on guard against the appearance of demons at all times.

"My ancestors were from Jinyang, and my parents died when I was young. After the war between Fu Jian and the Murong clan in Huguan County, I moved to Mount Hua to live in seclusion."

He'd been only seven at the time, but Chen Xing could still vividly recall the war from nine years ago. His house was set ablaze, and his grandmother ordered a loyal servant to send him to an old friend and subordinate in the depths of Mount Hua to study the numerous stars under heaven and cultivate the method of exorcising demons. In this era where magic had been silenced, ancient texts passed down through generations were no longer of any use and were left to gather dust.

At the age of sixteen, Chen Xing had a dream—of a big city that he had never visited. He told his shifu, who pondered for a long time and concluded that it must be Xiangyang City. He told Chen Xing that dreams were guidance from the Heart Lamp and that his Protector Martial God

awaited him there. He had to find his protector first, since he wouldn't be able to complete his mission without their help.

"And thus, I came to stand here before you," Chen Xing concluded.

"Finished talking?" Zhu Xu slowly pulled his sword out. "I waited so long, and what I get is this absolutely ridiculous story you made up?"

Chen Xing did not retreat. He faced the pointed tip of Zhu Xu's sword head-on, placing his right hand on his chest, above his heart. He then raised his hand, and a glorious white light actually burst from his palm, moving toward Zhu Xu. Zhu Xu thought the young man had been planning to bluff his way out so he was shocked by this light erupting out of nowhere. In an instant, he was so dazzled he couldn't open his eyes.

"What…what kind of trick is this?" Zhu Xu gripped his sword, momentarily unable to swing it down.

"This is the Heart Lamp," said Chen Xing.

Zhu Xu was stunned. "You are indeed…a mage. You can emit light? What's the use of this light?"

"It has no use," Chen Xing replied honestly. "All I can do is glow occasionally."

Flabbergasted, Zhu Xu immediately became suspicious.

Chen Xing shrugged helplessly as the light retreated. "I read the historical records and learned that a great calamity will befall the world. When the Divine Land meets its end, the keeper of the Heart Lamp, accompanied by the Protector Martial God, will venture out to exorcise demons. The sudden appearance of the Heart Lamp in this world means the revival of the demons is imminent. I must find the Martial God, awaken his strength, and help humanity withstand the calamity of Mara's[10] descent into this world.

"Disputes between the Hu and the Han people are trivial matters. Once Mara appears, the Divine Land will be completely overthrown: All living beings will be eradicated, and the earth will be cleansed and returned

to primordial times. Everything will reset from the beginning. Whether you're a Hu or a Han, no one will be able to escape."

"You…you…" Zhu Xu was momentarily speechless.

"I don't want this either, okay?" Chu Xing said helplessly. "Lord Governor, please understand at least this much. Do you think I wanted to come to Xiangyang? After Shifu died, I quickly packed up my things, left Mount Hua, hired a carriage, and rushed to Xiangyang. I somehow managed to get onto a boat and into the city without encountering any danger, and I came to the city master's manor and thought that *this* was the place. Of all people, I had to be the one to inherit the great undertaking of unification and restore the practice of exorcism in the human world. Still, I accepted it. However, for some reason, the readily available able-bodied men were all ignored, and I had to go to the dungeons to find some guy who looked as sick as a ghost. And now I have to figure out how to get out of the city, too!"

At this moment, the registrar delivered the register. Zhu Xu sheathed his sword to accept the document and immediately began to peruse it.

"The directory of the prisoners' identities has been found," the registrar informed them. "The prisoner's name is Xiang Shu. He's one of the Hu people."

Zhu Xu frowned deeply. Because of that light he'd given off, he believed in Chen Xing for now.

Chen Xing thought for a moment. "Whether he is a Hu or a Han… isn't really that important to me," he decided. "Okay, I'm actually not very fond of Hu people. Well, this will be difficult to deal with, but then again, he doesn't look like one. Eh…a Hu? Do any Hu people have the surname Xiang? Which tribe?"

Zhu Xu flipped to the last page of the register; it was a supplementary page of the detention directory brought in by the escort officer half a year ago. The first row of words stood out at once: "Evildoer, Xiang Shu."

“One year ago, the Commander of the Jianwei Guard wanted this man to be escorted to Jiankang and beheaded after a detailed interrogation,” the registrar supplied. “But no matter how severely he was tortured on the way, he never uttered a word. The escort officer died from illness while passing through Xiangyang, so Xiang Shu was imprisoned in this city. Their initial intention was to transfer him to Jiankang, but he was momentarily forgotten because there were too many prisoners on death row. He has been imprisoned ever since.”

“At the time of his capture, there was a massacre of innocent people in Guanzhong, offered as blood sacrifices to the heavens,” said Zhu Xu. “A total of two thousand were killed, both Hu and Han people. Men, women, old and young—not even chickens and dogs were spared. Our Great Jin’s soldiers went to great lengths to capture the culprit.”

Zhu Xu reluctantly took Chen Xing at his word about the Heart Lamp, but he had a new question now: “Why would you choose this person?”

“Why was he chosen?” Chen Xing repeated in disbelief. “I don’t know either, okay?!” He was starting to feel worried. *Don’t tell me that the light flashing before my eyes was a hallucination.*

Chen Xing took the register to see for himself. There were only a few lines: *Xiang Shu. Massacred at least two thousand people. A fierce general of the Hu tribes. Speculated to be a military official, the tribe he belongs to is unknown…*

How could this be?!

“I’ve already fed him all my medicine, and now you’re telling me that he’s taken thousands of lives?” Chen Xing said.

“Didn’t I tell you not to free him?” Zhu Xu said. “Just pick someone else.”

“‘Pick someone else?’ It doesn’t work like that! Wait, I think I’ll still have to…give this matter further consideration. I’ll ask him in detail when he recovers. What if he was wronged?”

Chen Xing felt ill at ease; he turned and beat a hasty retreat. Frowning, Zhu Xu turned around and looked down. From the manor in the northern part of the city, he gazed beyond the city walls; a dense mass of Qin troops in the far north covered the entire expanse.

At the same time, in a guest room in the governor's manor, the man under discussion heaved a sudden, heavy gasp and returned to life.

Chen Xing returned to the room, peered into the hallway outside, and then closed the door and looked back at the man. *He's alive now. What do I do? Do I have to strangle him to death? But no matter what everyone says, he should at least be allowed to defend himself, right? And he's my Protector!* He'd already come to consider this man, this Xiang Shu, "his," so he could hardly strangle him to death.

He decided to ask him again when he was able to speak. In the meantime, Chen Xing prepared a basin of hot water to help him clean his body.

"Your name is Xiang Shu?" He observed the man's face. "A Hu?"

The man had a high nose bridge, deep eyes, and distinct facial features. Emaciation had left his face sunken. His beard hadn't been shaved for six months and his hair was a tangled mess. His whole body was riddled with scars—all old injuries.

Chen Xing simply wiped him down; Xiang Shu himself could do the rest of the cleaning after he recovered. While wiping his body, Chen Xing noticed he had slender fingers, distinct knuckles, long limbs, and broad feet, and his legs looked sturdy and robust.

He was delighted. *My family's protector looks like he's excellent at fighting.*

Chen Xing retrieved a silver needle from his medicine bag and inserted it into an acupoint at the man's waist. Xiang Shu suddenly opened his eyes. Chen Xing immediately retreated, raising the needle to his nose to sniff it.

“You’ve been poisoned,” he said tentatively. “I fed you a revival pill. You won’t be able to move or speak for the next twelve hours. At this time tomorrow night, your body will return to normal. Then you’ll be able to recover gradually if you eat something.”

The man’s eyes remained open, staring at Chen Xing. His eyes were very bright, but he had a dangerous gaze reminiscent of a beast. Chen Xing tilted his head to the side slightly, frowned, and thought back to what a specific protector had once said.

“You’re the one chosen by the Heart Lamp,” he started. “From this moment on, you’re the Protector Martial God. I’m the Great Exorcist named Chen Xing, courtesy name Tianchi. But I’ve heard that you’ve… killed a lot of people? Is that true?” Chen Xing thought for a bit, then reluctantly continued, “No matter what you did before, this city will fall in a few days, and if I hadn’t saved you, you wouldn’t have survived. That’s something you should know, okay? You can’t do anything to me.”

The man couldn’t speak, but his gaze moved elsewhere. Chen Xing pulled the blanket over, covered him with it, and tucked him in slightly. He wondered if he should just truss him up with the blanket first, in case he was indeed a homicidal maniac who would explode as soon as the medicine lost its effect; he wouldn’t be easy to control if he did. But if that really *did* happen, he would be the first exorcist ever to be killed by his own protector. That would be too stupid.

He spent a long time ruminating over it, and eventually concluded… He was this guy’s savior, wasn’t he? He didn’t look like a rabid dog, so he probably wouldn’t slice up his own savior… Chen Xing yawned. He was too sleepy. He sat at the table and leaned on it, turning his head to look at Xiang Shu.

After he left Mount Hua half a month ago, he traversed land and water to get to Xiangyang, which was surrounded by the Qin army on all sides. He’d used a lot of energy just to get into the city, and after several days of anxiety and fear, he still had to think of a way to leave as soon as possible. Chen Xing was honestly too tired; he couldn’t even summon the strength to find a rope to tie up this Xiang Shu. He only meant to take a short rest, but somehow, he ended up falling asleep.

A blare of noise startled Chen Xing awake in an instant, with no idea of how long he'd been asleep.

"The Qin army is besieging the city—"

"The city has fallen!"

Chen Xing stood up, still in a disorientated daze. Outside, a loud noise rang out: a cacophony of wailing, shouting, and the cries of those engaged in battle.

No way, what kind of coincidence is this? Chen Xing immediately got up and headed outside. All he could hear were the shouts of people fighting and killing one another as they entered the courtyard. There was the whoosh of a fire canister as it sailed overhead and smashed into the roof of the governor's manor, setting it alight. When he ventured further out, he caught a glimpse of burning men and women rushing out into the street and dancing about wildly.

A soldier burst in, shouting, "The city has fallen! Leave! The governor is making for the south side of the city! He's confronting the enemy there! Go! Don't tarry!"

Situated in the north, the governor's manor was the first place to bear the brunt of the attack. As soon as they broke through the city wall, the enemy's cavalry had assaulted it relentlessly.

Chapter 3

THE BATTLE CRIES OUTSIDE were getting closer and closer, so Chen Xing dashed back to the room.

Fireballs whistled through the air as they flew into the city. The Qin army really had broken through. Chen Xing had seen the large-scale massacre that would happen once a city's defenses broke down. He had to find a way to escape as soon as possible.

He went in to shake his newly appointed protector, who could neither move nor speak, awake. Xiang Shu, however, had woken up already, and was now lying there staring at Chen Xing.

"I'll find a way to escape from the city with you in tow," Chen Xing promised. "Wait here."

Not that he needed to tell him to wait: Xiang Shu couldn't move, and he was wrapped up in a blanket to boot.

There's no way I can run away with Xiang Shu on my back, Chen Xing thought. He was about to leave to find a horse, when the thought came to him that marauders might rush in to rob the place and end up hacking Xiang Shu to death. He lifted Xiang Shu off the bed, along with the blanket that he was wrapped up in, and stuffed him underneath the bed so that he wouldn't be discovered.

"Don't worry," Chen Xing assured him. "I have the blessing of Sui Xing.[11] I've always been able to escape danger, no matter how serious the situation might be." Then he left to search for a horse.

But when he went out into the courtyard, he found that the stables were empty. All the warhorses had been taken, so he had no choice but to look for one outside.

The streets were filled with the charred bodies of innocents. The soldiers had wreaked destruction all around them, the two armies wholly absorbed in their fight against each other. Vats of oil came soaring in from outside the city walls one after another, igniting everything they hit.

“Oh, that smells good!” Chen Xing’s stomach actually began to grumble when he smelled the burnt meat.

He couldn’t find a horse, but he managed to locate a wheelbarrow. It would have to do. Chen Xing wheeled it to the gate of the courtyard, but it got stuck there—he ran back to the room to piggyback Xiang Shu out instead. He was dragging Xiang Shu out from under the bed when suddenly, the door to the governor’s manor banged open and Qin troops stormed in!

A flash of panicked inspiration struck Chen Xing. He immediately stuffed Xiang Shu back under the bed, overturned the shelves in the room, and threw the pillows and clothes haphazardly across the floor. Then he pulled the curtain down, threw it over the ceiling beam, and tied a knot. He dragged a chair over to stand on it, extended both arms through the noose, allowing it to cut into his underarms, and kicked the chair away.

No sooner did the chair fall to the floor than two Qin soldiers rushed in.

Chen Xing hung suspended from the beam, his eyes wide open as he stared at the soldiers unblinkingly. It was pitch dark, so the soldiers couldn’t discern where the rope was tied; all they saw was that someone had hanged themselves. After a look around, they surmised that the place had already been looted. Cursing their bad luck, they kicked the table over and left.

Once the Qin troops left, Chen Xing hurried down and dragged Xiang Shu out. However, he’d only gotten halfway through hauling him outside when another group of Qin soldiers rushed in from the back yard, so Chen Xing hung himself back up again in a hurry. The second group of soldiers rushed in, looked around, and left as well.

Watching all this unfold, Xiang Shu was at a loss for words.

Chen Xing dangled there for approximately fifteen minutes to make sure that no one else was coming, then untied the knot and came down. He slung Xiang Shu over his shoulder and ran toward the back yard, gasping for breath as he went.

Someone had taken the wheelbarrow, but in exchange, a warhorse had appeared out of nowhere. It looked like a Qin horse, and the corpse of a Qin soldier impaled by an arrow hung from the stirrup.

“This is great!” Chen Xing said, putting Xiang Shu on the horse. “We’ll definitely be able to escape now!”

However, Chen Xing forgot one important thing—he was quite lucky, but Xiang Shu’s luck was just average.

After Chen Xing got on the horse and secured the blanket-wrapped form of Xiang Shu, he rushed out of the alley to the side street, only to find flaming arrows and fire grenades everywhere, as if the heavens had poured a basin of fire over the city. Xiangyang City had been instantly transformed into a fiery purgatory.

The warhorse neighed and began to gallop along, making the two of them bounce wildly as it went. As he jerked back and forth on the horse, Chen Xing turned around to say something to Xiang Shu and abruptly realized—Xiang Shu wasn’t there anymore!

“Whoa! Whoa!” Chen Xing immediately tugged on the reins to stop the horse. “Damn it! He fell off!”

Chen Xing turned the horse around and hurried back along the road to look for him. He found Xiang Shu lying flat on the ground at the corner of the alley and the main street. Half the blanket had come loose when he fell, but at least Chen Xing had found him. Chen Xing figured that tying him to the horse was probably his best option, and just as the thought crossed his mind, he found a rope that just so happened to be on the saddle! *Qin soldier saddles are well equipped with necessities*, he thought.

Chen Xing wrapped Xiang Shu up properly in his blanket again and tied him up with a rope. Then, with great difficulty, he lifted Xiang Shu back onto the horse and secured him snugly in place with the rope. As he was tying the knots, a group of Jin soldiers spotted him and charged over. “What are you doing?! Are you abducting a civilian woman?”

“He’s a man!” Chen Xing said quickly. “This is my father, who’s been half-paralyzed for many years!” He grabbed Xiang Shu by the hair to show them his face.

The Jin soldiers were on the verge of nocking their arrows and shooting him, but they stopped when they saw that it was indeed a man. “Hurry to the southeast side!” they shouted to the two of them. “Don’t head

north! The governor’s manor has been seized, and the north side of the city is overrun with Qin soldiers!”

“Be careful!” Chen Xing called back to them.

The Jin soldiers left. Chen Xing was worried that Xiang Shu would fall off again, so he wrapped the rope around him twice and tightly knotted the ends. Now he was certain that Xiang Shu wouldn’t fall off. He wiped his sweat and was about to mount the horse when, out of nowhere, a stray arrow flew in and lodged itself in the horse’s rump.

An instant later, the warhorse let out a prolonged whinny, and its four legs kicked off the ground madly before it dashed northward.

“Hey! Hey! Come back!” Chen Xing quickly gave chase, but the warhorse galloped away with Xiang Shu on its back and vanished into the sea of fire without a trace.

Chen Xing was flabbergasted. He looked all around him. The Jin troops were pouring into the northern part of the city, advancing on the Qin army in full force and sweeping them up in a fierce battle. The killing had driven them all mad with bloodlust. The citizens of Xiangyang were lucky that Chen Xing had briefly tormented them earlier at dusk; although they had dispersed afterward, they were all still awake. If they had been asleep by now, they wouldn’t have been able to respond as quickly when the Qin army attacked the city.

Soldier or civilian, young or old, everyone in the city knew that once Xiangyang fell, there would be a massacre inside the city walls. There would be no survivors then, so each and every one of them now fought with everything they had to stay alive.

Chen Xin ran almost an entire li[12] along the main road. Flames engulfed the houses on both sides, and corpses littered the streets.

“Where’s the horse?!” Chen Xing shouted angrily. “Where did it go? Get your horsey ass back here!”

Dawn was starting to break. The day looked to be an overcast one, and the black smoke from the burning city blotted out the sky and made Chen Xing choke. Tears streamed from his eyes and he couldn’t stop

coughing. He dashed across the cheval-de-frise erected on the main street and found himself on the front lines of the war between the Qin and Jin troops. A cavalry rider spotted him at once and charged toward him, raising his long sword and swinging it down at him.

Chen Xing yelped and ducked, covering his head. The cavalryman missed, and just as he looked back to see if he had hit his target, his horse galloped forward and rammed him straight into a clothesline strung up high outside a house. The cavalryman went down, landing headfirst as he hit the ground. His body convulsed uncontrollably, blood streaming from his eyes, nose and mouth.

Excellent! Chen Xing thought. He ran over and was just about to take the man's weapon when the sound of hooves striking the ground came from behind. Chen Xing promptly lay down on the spot and squeezed under the dead cavalryman.

When the Qin cavalry entered, they headed straight for the stronghold in Xiangyang City, preparing to fight the Jin troops in the streets. No one noticed Chen Xing in the chaos.

Another wave of Qin troops passed by. Chen Xing knew that if he went around searching for Xiang Shu looking like he did now, he would simply be offering his head up on a silver platter. He dragged the cavalryman's corpse into a house and stripped him of his armor and underclothes so he could put them on instead.

At this point in history, the War of the Eight Princes had been fought in the north.[13] After the remnants of the Jin court fled south, Liu Cong's Han, Shi Le's Zhao, Xianbei Murong's Yan, Ran Min's Wei, and now Fu Jian's Qin all took turns on the stage, one performer after the next. They each founded their own countries where the bloodlines of the Hu and Han people intermingled, and so many of those among the Qin army were Han. Chen Xing didn't look particularly conspicuous after changing into a set of Qin gear, except for the slightly oversized helmet and armor.

Despite his complete exhaustion, Chen Xing hastily fastened the band of his helmet and ran northward. While he ran, he kept an eye out for abandoned warhorses to see if he could find Xiang Shu. As he darted past

Zhaoming Terrace [14] in the center of the city, a Qin commander suddenly stopped him.

“Hey, you!” the commander shouted. “Which unit are you from?!”

“Me?” Chen Xing asked. “Are you talking to me?”

Chen Xing spoke in the Ya vernacular, [15] so the commander assumed he was a Chang’an guard. “What are you in such a rush for?!” he shouted. “Head northwest!”

“I was about to head over!” Chen Xing said. “Give me a horse!”

“We don’t have any!”

With that, the commander shoved a shield into Chen Xing’s hands. Chen Xing had no choice but to hold it. The commander pushed him again. “After you pass Zhaoming Terrace, head west to protect the flammables cart!” he yelled. “The entire Jin army has been dispatched, so now’s our chance! Push the cart to the drum tower! Be careful!”

So Chen Xing had to hurry to catch up with the huge cart in front of him. The two horses pulling it bucked restlessly in their positions and neighed with fear while two Qin soldiers tried to pacify them. The commander pushed from behind, shouting, “Hurry up and go! Quickly now!”

A whistle sounded high in the air. Tens of millions of flaming arrows shot out of the governor’s manor in the center of the city and rained down on everyone’s heads in a fiery downpour!

Chen Xing wanted to take this chance to steal a horse. He ran over, his shield held in front of him, but the commander shouted, “Get on the cart! Get in the cart! Don’t worry about me!”

Chen Xing jumped onto the cart. A swathe of flaming arrows that blotted out the sky cascaded down like raindrops. The commander was struck and his whole body instantly caught ablaze. He cried out in agony.

“Help! Help!”

How could Chen Xing be so heartless as to keep going? He went to put out the fire on the commander’s body—but the commander fell

backward, pulling the oil-filled canisters down with him. He spilled their contents over his body, igniting himself with a loud whoosh, and let out a bloodcurdling screech from within the flames. The two soldiers saw that things had gone south and turned back to help, but Chen Xing called out to them, “It’s too late to save him! Come back!”

Fires broke out everywhere. Chen Xing quickly got on the cart—he had to drag it, laden with fire canisters, away from the flames. However, as soon as he sat in the driver’s seat, flames started burning in the open-top containers behind him. The two horses pulling the chariot were spooked and wouldn’t listen to anyone’s instructions. They dragged the chariot forward, fiercely burning fire canisters and all, bringing Chen Xing, who was driving it, along on their mad dash.

“To the north!” Chen Xing shouted.

He yanked on the reins, trying his best to control the direction of the galloping horses. When he steered them from west to north, he promptly crashed through the frontmost line of the battle between the Qin and Jin armies. Amidst a brilliantly burning blaze, he stormed the rear of the Qin army.

“Where’s Xiang Shu?!” Chen Xing looked back and caught a glimpse of an utter disaster: fire canisters spat out flames, one after another, and there were very few people around. He passed through a wall of fire to hear the panicked shouts of a small unit of cavalrymen.

“What are you doing?! Where did you come from? Stop! *Stop!*”

“I want to stop too!” Chen Xing called to them over his shoulder. “But they’re not listening to me!”

Chen Xing looked everywhere for his lost horse, but to his alarm, the flaming cart barreled onto the main street. All the cavalrymen on patrol were frightened out of their wits at the sight, and everyone started chasing Chen Xing. Yet no matter how desperately the cavalrymen spurred their warhorses on, their speed was ultimately limited. On the other hand, the horses dragging Chen Xing’s cart had fire licking at their behinds, so they galloped at a speed beyond anything any normal horse could achieve. It really was true that a horse burned by the coachman would leave ten

thousand cavalrymen in the dust. The horses trampled everything below their hooves as they stampeded through the long street like streaks of lightning, heading back to the governor's manor in the north.

When the Qin army breached the inner part of Xiangyang City six hours ago, they took the governor's manor as their first temporary stronghold, commandeering it as a base to transport oil vats and arrows, gather troops, and start street battles. As long as their line of defense advanced in an orderly manner, seizing Xiangyang City within three days would be a breeze. At the moment, a large number of Qin generals and military counselors were discussing operational logistics within the manor.

"We haven't located Shulü Kong yet?"

"…must be in this city…"

"The camp is under attack! The camp is under attack!"

These gathered commanders were about to suffer the worst luck of their lives. Among their number were the great general Murong Chui, the Zhonglang general Shi Yue, and the prince of Changle, Fu Pi. The three of them were studying a map on the desk. A group of counselors had proposed to either burn Xiangyang or defeat the enemy by capturing their leader, and they were embroiled in a heated debate.

It was too late to set up a cheval de frise, as the battlefront had already been pushed to Zhaoming Terrace in the center of the city. Most of the guards who defended the rear were no different from rabid dogs. They rushed to the south of the city to fight over who could collect the most human heads and win the biggest reward. Who could have imagined that the enemy would attack them here at such a moment?

"Who dares?!" Fu Pi shouted furiously, raising his sword as he prepared to meet the enemy head-on.

The three main commanders, including Murong Chui and Shi Yue, were all powerful generals who could go up against a hundred enemies by themselves. Individual assassins were nothing in their eyes, so who could have the guts to attack their camp? What an absolute fool!

"Where is the enemy?" asked Murong Chui.

“At the entrance!” the messenger cried.

No sooner had the words left his mouth than Chen Xing shouted, “Get out of the way! There’s oil coming! AHH!”

The flaming cart made its grand entrance. Murong Chui had just dashed out of the door when he came face to face with Chen Xing. He thought to himself that a disaster was imminent and whirled around to flee for his life. Chen Xing no longer cared who he was going to crash into; he leaped out into the courtyard and jumped into a pond, breaking through the thin layer of ice to hide in the water.

Before he could directly confront the enemy, the cart knocked Fu Pi over. The wheels tripped over the threshold and all the vats of burning oil on the cart flew into the hall.

Chen Xing didn’t dare to look over his shoulder and scrambled to escape. He turned around in the midst of the explosions and stumbled out—and just in time too, because behind him, the entire manor burst into flames with a loud blast. Panicked shouts echoed as people started running outside. The roof collapsed from the explosions and the entire cavalry retreated to the stronghold to rescue people from the catastrophe.

“The Qin camp was burned down!”

The Jin army witnessed all this playing out from a distance in front of Zhaoming Terrace, and their morale immediately soared. Zhu Xu gathered his remaining eight thousand men and they hacked their way through the main street. Chen Xing took off his helmet, at a complete loss as he watched the scene before him. The Qin troops had suddenly suffered a landslide defeat and were all retreating. The places the Qin had seized—Zhaoming Terrace, the main street, Lutai Road to the south of the city, and all the other streets and alleys—were being recaptured by the fierce Jin soldiers who were unafraid of death.

“But where is he?!” Chen Xing was becoming impatient. He threw his helmet onto the ground and looked around in a daze.

Billowing black smoke blotted out the sun. Chen Xing’s face was filthy with soot and smoke. Suddenly, something occurred to him: he closed his eyes and stood there quietly. In an instant, his world was deathly silent.

The cries of battle seemed to echo from far away, and a distant light flashed in the darkness.

Another flash.

Amidst the tranquility, Chen Xing abruptly turned around, stepping across the blood-drenched ground and quickly turning into an alley. He passed through a residence’s backyard, and there it was: his warhorse!

The horse, with Xiang Shu still tied tightly to its back, was stuck at the entrance. Xiang Shu’s body stuck out too far at either side, thudding into the walls again and again as the horse tried to go inside.

Chapter 4

THE FOURTH YEAR of the Taiyuan period; second day of the Second Lunar Month. Conflagrations in Xiangyang City obscured the sky as a lone rider charged out of the besieged city, breaking through black smoke and galloping far away from the carnage to the south.

At noon, with the blazing sun high in the sky, Chen Xing urged his horse onward as he fled Xiangyang with Xiang Shu. They had already covered nearly twenty miles by then. The roads along the way were jam-packed—all that could be seen on South Dangyang Road were commoners fleeing from the calamity with their families. Wails of anguish swept across the land; the road was so congested people could hardly take a step forward and the cries of those searching for their loved ones seemed to go on endlessly.

A hundred and fifty years ago, Guan Yu had heavily besieged Cao Wei's garrison outside the city, drowning his seven armies and securing a glorious victory. Later, the defeated had fled to Mai City, and the route they had taken was the one they were on now. Sorrowful cries shook the heavens and earth, as if mourning for the immortal God of War who lived in the Divine Land of years past.

Chen Xing was fraught with anxiety. He couldn't pass through the crowd, so he had no choice but to take a detour through a side path. When they reached the foot of a mountain, he set Xiang Shu down and untied the layers of rope he was trussed up in.

In an era of war, every nine houses out of ten were deserted in Jingzhou. People either migrated south to Jiaozhi or fled east to Jiankang, Gusu, and other such places. Chen Xing made his way through the woods and found a small village nestled at the foot of a mountain. As winter gave way to spring, the afternoon mist was beginning to rise, creating a tranquil atmosphere.

It was evident that the village had also gone through some kind of disaster that had left it in shambles. All the livestock and guard dogs were

gone. Chen Xing trespassed into two houses and saw no one, so he had to try to find some water from the well for Xiang Shu to drink. When he inspected Xiang Shu's complexion, he was relieved to find that despite the previous night's turmoil, Xiang Shu was still in decent shape. The twelve-hour mark was at hand; after the effects of the medicine waned, Xiang Shu's meridians should be able to recover. Chen Xing needed to find some food quickly to help him restore his physical strength… This guy was really too skinny. He'd probably look pretty good after some nourishment.

According to Zhu Xu's register, Xiang Shu was twenty years old this year, only four years older than Chen Xing. However, among the Hu people, it was not uncommon for men to marry and start families as young as thirteen. At his age, Xiang Shu was more than capable of establishing his own household and career.

"Protector, do you feel better?" Chen Xing was backlit by the sunlight as he studied Xiang Shu's appearance. Xiang Shu's face was covered in soot from all the smoke, and since he had a tall stature to begin with, now he looked just like a savage. When Chen Xing looked at himself, though, he wasn't much better off. After all that chaos and turmoil, the two of them looked like a pair of beggars.

Chen Xing fetched some more water and helped Xiang Shu wipe his face. The effect was astounding. Beneath the grime, Xiang Shu's eyes remained clear and bright. His face was gaunt, with thick eyelashes, eyebrows as sharp as swords, and eyes as fathomless as the night sky. The lips that peeked through his messy beard were now rosy thanks to the medicine. With just a bit of grooming, he would definitely be an exceptionally handsome man!

My family's protector is so good-looking!

Chen Xing couldn't help but exclaim, "Ahhh, what a handsome piece of jade!"

And other than *that part*, which absolutely satisfied the size standards of the Hu people…neither his facial features nor his skin reflected his ethnicity at all. How could he be Hu? Dress him in a refined robe and hang an ancient sword by his waist, and he would transform into an impeccable

scholar. As he trod lightly in wooden clogs and whistled crisply to the moon above, the literati in Jiankang, who knew only effete language without substance, would all have to stand aside.

Chen Xing didn't really have any requirements for his protector's appearance, though. Anything was fine as long as his protector could fight. The road ahead was long, and abundant with thistles and thorns. Someone like Chen Xing, whose only redeeming feature was his good luck, could only rely on the heavens for help when facing his enemies, so having a protector who was skilled in fighting was of utmost importance.

But good-looking men were pleasing to the eye, and being in the company of one could lift the spirits. *Thank goodness,* Chen Xing thought. *Hopefully this new protector won't turn out to be a useless decorative ornament like me.*

"I heard that the emperor of Great Qin, Fu Jian, is fond of good-looking men." Chen Xing sat under a tree with Xiang Shu's head rested on his thigh, casually wiping Xiang Shu's neck for him. "I heard he even wanted to take care of Murong Chong in his palace. In a few months, we'll need to find an opportunity to go north to Chang'an, tidy you up a little, then rely on your looks to seduce him!"

Xiang Shu's fingers twitched slightly. Chen Xing got up and went to the riverbank to wash the cloth. The creek was filled with crushed ice, and the flowing water was bone-chillingly cold.

"Whether you're Hu or Han, it doesn't matter," he continued. "As long as you don't kill people as and when you wish, then—"

But before he could finish his sentence, Chen Xing took a blow to the back of his head. He passed out at once.

A quarter of an hour later, Chen Xing's face was doused with cold water. He woke up and realized that he had been stripped of his outer robe. He wore only an unlined garment with a blanket wrapped around both him and the chair he sat on. He had been tied up by Xiang Shu, then carried out and placed in the backyard.

As soon as he woke up, Chen Xing started yelling. “Is this how you’re gonna treat the guy who saved you?”

Xiang Shu casually examined Chen Xing’s belongings. There was a charcoal stove nearby with a fire under it, and a pot of white rice porridge was being cooked on top. It was probably the last bit of rice from the farmer’s house.

“Asshole!” Chen Xing shouted. “Say something!”

Xiang Shu fiddled with Chen Xing’s dagger briefly, flipping it back and forth before setting it aside and inspecting his medicinal pouch. He didn’t recognize any of the medicinal items inside. Chen Xing, wrapped up tight like a caterpillar, couldn’t move.

Xiang Shu went to the well to draw a bucket of water, then stripped himself bare with no care that Chen Xing could see him. He had already seen everything anyway. Xiang Shu bathed and washed his hair, and after his bath, he looked into the water as he used Chen Xing’s dagger to shave his beard off.

“Hey!” Chen Xing was still yelling at him. *“Hey!”*

His face was shaved clean. In less than an hour, Xiang Shu had tidied himself up nicely. When he turned around, despite being so skinny he barely looked human, his handsome features were apparent. His deep, piercing eyes held a profound intensity, and the contours of his face were sharp and distinct, exuding an unmatched vigor. He sat down in front of the stove and began to eat.

Chen Xing’s stomach grumbled noisily.

After finishing his porridge, Xiang Shu entered a room, where he rummaged around and found two unlined garments belonging to the man who had owned the house. He changed into them. The owner of the house had been a hunter before he died, and Xiang Shu took his outdoor hunting clothes and tied up the martial sleeves. When he appeared again, the clothes were a little small on him, but he still had a somewhat majestic air about him.

Chen Xing was speechless. He actually forgot about everything else for a moment—all he could think was: *He's obviously a Han. How could he be a Hu?*

Xiang Shu grabbed the hunter's bow and arrows, bundled up Chen Xing's dagger, robe, and medicine bag, then grabbed the reins and mounted the horse. He glanced at Chen Xing with a cold, detached expression.

Chen Xing struggled. "Let me go!" he pleaded. "If you leave me tied up here, I'll die!"

Xiang Shu turned the horse around. Chen Xing was still shouting from behind him. "Do you not want to be a protector?! If you don't want to, then don't! When did I ever provoke you?! I saved your life, and I even had a chance to kill you, but see, I didn't…"

Xiang Shu had his back to Chen Xing. He had spurred the horse into a slow amble, but when he heard those words, he slowly came to a stop. He nocked an arrow to his bow and turned it in Chen Xing's direction.

Chen Xing was tongue-tied in shock.

Xiang Shu released the arrow, and it shot over with a *whoosh*! Chen Xing shut his eyes tight, but he felt the ropes around his body loosen—they had been sliced by the arrow.

"Yah!" Xiang Shu shouted. He steered his horse onto the main road and left the village.

"Hey!" Chen Xing ran out dressed in only an unlined garment, gritting his teeth. "Get back here! Protector! You bastard!"

That was the first time Chen Xing heard Xiang Shu's voice. That "yah" was clear and powerful, and it resonated through the air. Chen Xing couldn't help but think, *My family's protector has a really nice voice… Wait, no! A bastard is a bastard! Why did my protector run away?!*

As the sun set and cold wind gusted by, Chen Xing stood in the village, looking all around him with a blank expression.

What do I do now? Chen Xing was utterly dumbstruck. His stomach growled again.

I'm so hungry… Xiang Shu left some food behind, why don't I just eat first? He was starving by this point, so he wanted to hurry up and eat before thinking about anything else. He didn't even know where that bastard had run off to; what on earth had Chen Xing ever done to provoke him?! As Chen Xing thought about it, he almost flipped the whole pot of porridge over.

Night descended on Jingzhou, bringing with it a sudden chill that swept across the land. Chen Xing sought refuge in the abandoned house and rummaged around for some clothes to wear. Unexpectedly, a dog appeared, barking incessantly at him. Chen Xing patiently calmed the dog and,

finding some food, fed it to appease its hunger. The dog, now nourished, seemed to gradually accept its fate of abandonment and shared the cold night with Chen Xing.

Wrapped in whatever he could find in the desolate house, Chen Xing held the dog close, shivering. “It’s so cold, how did it come to this? The protector chosen by the Heart Lamp is actually a bastard?”

Chen Xing lamented bitterly in his heart. In the chilling night, he couldn’t help but think back on the expectations that reality had shattered for him. On the day he left the mountain, he never imagined that things would eventually turn out like this.

His steadfast belief stemmed from a longstanding tradition: throughout history, every exorcist had always been accompanied by a protector, whose purpose was to protect the exorcist during their exorcisms and ensure they wouldn’t be disturbed. The protector by the side of the Great Exorcist, who oversaw Headquarters, bore the illustrious title of Martial God.

Today, Chen Xing was the only remaining exorcist in the world, so naturally, he was that Great Exorcist. As for the Martial God, the Heart Lamp had appointed Xiang Shu as his protector.

Chen Xing had read many ancient texts, including a silk calligraphy remnant he’d found. It was half of the sacrificial ritual written by the protector Wen Che for the exorcist Xin Yuanping. Xin Yuanping had died fighting the demonic dragon of the Si River, which Wen Che later exterminated. After he avenged Xin Yuanping, Wen Che drowned himself by jumping into the Si River and was forgotten.

In the Han Dynasty, Xie Yiwu, the Great Exorcist who became the governor of Xingzhou, never married or had children. He was accompanied by General Hu Bi, whose reputation was renowned throughout the land, and the Jianghu’s[16] number one swordsman of the time, Wang Yue. Together, they became legends of their generation.

In even more recent times, Zhang Liang, the Marquis Liu, became a disciple of Huang Shigong and was proficient in various arts. As for his protector, opinions about him were varied and conflicting. Some said his

protector was Xiao He, while others said it was Han Xin. But when Zhang Liang fled under the pretense of death several years later, Han Xin was trapped and killed by Xiao He and Lu Hou. Historians criticized Xiao He extensively, leading many to speculate that Han Xin had served as Zhang Liang's protector. There were also tales suggesting that in the Han Dynasty, the Great Exorcist had two Protector Martial Gods on either side of his seat.

Half asleep, Chen Xing became immersed in the memory of his shifu during his final days.

"Sui Xing is part of your fate; it is everything you'll rely on in your life, and it is the barrier that you'll eventually have to overcome. Sui Xing reincarnates once every hundred years and only stays in the human world for twenty. Once twenty years have passed, it'll return to the heavens."

Chen Xing followed behind his shifu. "So my good luck will only last until I'm twenty?"

"No, far from it. When the time comes, Sui Xing will be released from your natal chart." Shifu paused and turned to look back from within the maple forest. "Under what circumstances does someone lose the ruling star of their life? You should know the answer to that question already, so I don't need to explain further."

Chen Xing felt as if he had been struck by a thunderclap. "I…I won't live past twenty."

"Fate is predetermined by the heavens," Shifu replied calmly. "Everything in this world follows its own path of growth and decline, and everything has a place it must ultimately return to. Heaven has bestowed this destiny upon you. Why not make the most of your limited time and do something meaningful for the Divine Land?" Shifu's voice echoed in his ears. "Since you had that dream, make a trip to Xiangyang. You're the Great Exorcist. Within you lies the only functioning Heart Lamp in this world. In these desolate times, amidst the dark nights when all the stars are hidden, you are the seed of light in the human realm. Over the next four years, you must do everything you can to reclaim the world's lost mana. Discover why the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth has dried up. Use your Heart Lamp to illuminate the vast expanse around you.

“Of course, if you wish to idle away the remainder of your time before your twentieth birthday, then search for your dao[17] with the brief time you have left. Go, seek it out.”

The day after Xiang Shu’s departure, Chen Xing scavenged the nearby houses for rations. He fed the dog until it was full, then donned a large, floral-patterned jacket meant for the mistress of the house and carelessly tossed on a pair of men’s cotton trousers he had found. They made for a makeshift outfit, but they would at least help him fight off the cold. With his horse, silver, and medicine bag all snatched by Xiang Shu, he set off on foot, heading toward Mai City to find a way to acquire travel expenses for his journey to Chang’an.

When the dog saw Chen Xing leaving, it chased after him, wagging its tail as it followed.

Chen Xing took a deep breath, thinking of Xiang Shu. All he’d done for the dog was feed it, but here it was, following him! Xiang Shu couldn’t even measure up to a dog!

Forget it. Shifu had always said not to take too much to heart. There were still many days to come; if they were truly destined to meet again, Xiang Shu wouldn’t be able to run away. And if they weren’t? Then what was there to be angry about?

Still, less than half a month after leaving the mountain, the setbacks Chen Xing had faced left him extremely dispirited and downcast. He really couldn’t understand where he had gone wrong.

While his imagination ran wild, a fleeing horse-drawn carriage suddenly stopped at the roadside.

“Hey! Get on!” someone shouted at him. “Where are you from? Madam said to let you on!”

Perplexed, Chen Xing hesitated for a moment.

It was early in the morning, and many people were traveling south toward Mai City with their families, including some well-to-do families who had escaped from the north. Chen Xing, wearing a thick floral-patterned jacket with a dog trailing behind him, looked like the foolish son

of a landlord. He'd been born good-looking, besides, so people more or less couldn't bear to see him suffer, which prompted a convoy to slow down and pick him and his dog up along the way.

The family Chen Xing was traveling with had fled from Fan City. The master, in his fifties, was accompanied by his wife and ten-year-old daughter. When the old lady in the family and her servant girls had learned of Xiangyang City's fall, she hastily decided to flee southward, preparing to pass through Mai City en route to Changsha County to take refuge with relatives. The master was rather advanced in years. He had fled in a panic late at night with his family, and when he heard about the wanton massacres and the suffering of the Han people, he was overcome with boundless sorrow, struggling to breathe. Lying motionless in the carriage, unable to move, with both eyes shut tight, he teetered on the brink of death.

Chen Xing, grateful for the assistance, first thanked the elderly lady. He briefly introduced himself as a scholar from the south and then turned his attention to the ailing master. "What happened?" Chen Xing checked his pulse, then inquired about his symptoms. "Is he ill? Do you have any needles? Lend me one; he'll be fine after a session of acupuncture."

The old lady quickly ordered someone to retrieve an embroidery needle. Chen Xing heated it before applying it to the old man, and sure enough, after being pricked seven times, the man spat out a mouthful of congested blood and gradually regained consciousness.

"A divine doctor!" people cried out.

"Divine doctor—!"

Everyone was in a flurry to thank Chen Xing for saving their master's life. With much modesty, Chen Xing quickly waved his hand in acknowledgement, and the group continued on their route to Mai City. Along the way, Chen Xing shared a brief account of his experience being robbed by Xiang Shu, prompting sighs of sympathy from his companions.

The madam tutted. "You didn't find a bodyguard, you found trouble. Public morals are declining with each passing day," she added solemnly. "People aren't what they used to be."

“Isn’t that right?” Chen Xing felt a bit better after pouring his heart out.

As strangers who had come together by chance, they parted ways when they reached Mai City. The family put together forty-two silvers as a thank-you gift, along with an extra roast chicken.

Chen Xing held the heavy silver ingots—they weighed about three pounds—and said his farewells. He had money again! He should change into a fresh set of clothes first, then convert the silver into gold. The silver would be very uncomfortable weighing down his trousers. Inconvenience aside, carrying such heavy silver around also made him an easy target for thieves.

“On the day my mother gave birth to me,” Chen Xing recounted to his dog, “it’s said that Sui Xing descended to earth. My luck has been remarkably good ever since. Look, now we have roast chicken to eat, huh?”

Chen Xing split the roast chicken in half and shared it with the dog. Then, he sought out a public bath for a relaxing soak and headed to a clothing store. He picked his clothes out meticulously before settling on his final purchase. The new outfit instantly restored his noble, gentlemanly appearance, and to top it off, he even bought a small mink jacket for the dog. With that taken care of, he confidently strode to the bank.

Although Mai City was quite small at the time, it boasted all the essential necessities. Serving as the largest distribution center for the exchange of goods, it had thrived since Xiangyang fell under siege a year prior, attracting passing businessmen to conduct their transactions here instead. While the Jin army had failed to rescue Xiangyang, retaining Mai City promised some degree of self-sufficiency. News of Xiangyang City’s fall had made its way here via the people fleeing south, and its streets bustled with refugees overnight.

The inns, tea houses, and restaurants in the city were crowded with wealthy people heading south. There was a hubbub of heated discussion; some pledged donations and volunteered as laborers to bolster the army’s efforts, while others deemed the city unsafe and advocated for traveling south as soon as possible. The pervasive tension kept everyone on edge.

Priorities were clear: exchange money at the bank first, then proceed to the government office for customs clearance documents. With that taken care of, travelers could smoothly head north to Chang'an. Given the ongoing conflict between the Qin and Jin nations, prudent handling of the customs procedures was imperative.

Chen Xing entered the bank carrying a three-pound bundle of silver. The bank had already been cleared out as people were preparing to flee. As he stepped into the main hall, a peculiar silence greeted him, permeated by an unsettling atmosphere.

"Sir, I want to change…" Chen Xing began, but he abruptly came to a halt.

The bank assistants, bank teller, and even the bank's hired thugs had their mouths agape, and their wrists and ankles were bound with iron rods torn from the bank's windows. As soon as they heard Chen Xing enter, all of them turned and looked at him with their mouths open—their jaws had been dislocated, giving them an uncanny resemblance to glowering geese.

A man leaned casually against the cashier's window, his body angled to the side as his left hand rested on the counter. Clad in hunter's clothes, that man was none other than Xiang Shu!

Xiang Shu knocked on the counter with his finger to prompt the teller to take the money out. The teller, trembling and with his mouth agape from his dislocated jaw, used a slide rule to arrange a row of gold ingots for Xiang Shu. As he wrapped them up in a small bundle, he shot a panicked glance at Chen Xing, signaling him to flee.

Xiang Shu turned his head slightly when he heard Chen Xing. Their eyes locked.

A group of Jin soldiers was passing by outside. Without a moment's hesitation, Chen Xing roared, "Help! Someone's robbing the bank!"

Chapter 5

IN AN INSTANT, Xiang Shu grabbed the bag of gold ingots from the counter, but Chen Xing had already run outside.

The group of soldiers just happened to be passing by. With so many refugees around, the soldiers' most pressing concern was people taking advantage of the chaos in the city to start looting. With this one shout from Chen Xing, dozens of them swiftly blocked the entrance to the bank until not even a drop of water could trickle through. Meanwhile, the instigator, Chen Xing, had already strode away to hide in the opposite alley.

Wait, no! Chen Xing suddenly remembered a grave problem—that guy was like some kind of monster; he could kill without blinking an eye! Wouldn't causing a scene like this get those Jin soldiers killed?

Yet Xiang Shu remained calm and unperturbed as he emerged with the bag of gold. The Jin soldiers immediately surrounded him, bows at the ready, denouncing him and demanding he put down the money he had stolen.

From his hiding place in the alley, Chen Xing chanted silently, *Please don't kill those soldiers, please don't kill those soldiers, please don't kill those soldiers.* If Xiang Shu started fighting and killed someone before his eyes, Chen Xing resolved, he wouldn't employ him as protector no matter what.

Just then, a voice rang out behind him. "Hey! Do you know how many people died because of Dongzhe Bank Joint Venture's greed? Why are you sticking your nose where it doesn't belong?"

Chen Xing looked back and found a tall, solidly built man standing behind him. He wore a bamboo hat that covered most of his face, though a knife scar was visible amid the untidy stubble on his slender jawline. He leaned against a wall, his hands hidden in his sleeves; evidently, this event had also drawn his attention.

Instead of answering him, Chen Xing returned to watching the situation unfold. More and more soldiers were arriving, and they all had their arrows nocked and pointed at Xiang Shu, who stood at the bank's entrance. If their commander gave the order, they would all release their arrows and turn Xiang Shu into a sieve on the spot. Chen Xing couldn't help but worry for his safety.

However, all Xiang Shu did was whistle once. Just as the commander, who had threatened him several times for naught, was about to order his soldiers to release their arrows, Xiang Shu shook the bundle in his hands, and with a whoosh, gold blotted out the sky. The golden nuggets glimmered with the strength of meteors as they rained down and were met with blood-curdling shrieks. Xiang Shu flipped onto the warhorse that had rushed over from a long street and, without so much as a glance, he flicked his wrist at Chen Xing, who was hiding in the alley.

Using hidden weapons, mounting the horse, and swiftly taking Chen Xing down—these three things happened in a fleeting instant. *My family's protector is so powerful!* Chen Xing thought, but his body's reaction was delayed. Before he could act, the tael of gold flew toward his face, about to knock him unconscious. At that moment, the martial expert in the bamboo hat threw his hand out, whipping out a dark, heavy iron wine bowl. Clank! He caught the gold ingot, which spun around the bowl with a buzzing sound.

"Wait!" shouted Chen Xing. He ran out of the alley to give chase, but in the blink of an eye, Xiang Shu had ridden away and disappeared without a trace. People streamed in to snatch up the gold ingots for themselves as he passed through, and the intersection became so crammed it was hard to move. The soldiers, for their part, had all been struck in the forehead by the rain of gold and lay sprawled on the ground, unconscious.

Chen Xing gritted his teeth, but he couldn't do anything about this new protector of his. He could neither best him in a fight nor catch up to him, so what option did he have?

"Your enemy?" The martial artist walked out of the alley holding the wine bowl. He motioned for Chen Xing to retrieve the gold but Chen Xing

just waved his hand. “You don’t even want gold?” the martial artist said. “I’ll take it, then.”

Chen Xing had never had the habit of saving money. In any case, he was so lucky that he couldn’t believe it himself, and that was just thanks to relying on how Sui Xing was intertwined with his fate. When he lacked money, the heavens inevitably bestowed him with some to spend, never allowing him to starve to death. So he nodded at the martial artist, thanked him for his help, and went into the bank alone. The martial artist stroked his cheek, revealing half of his unkempt, handsome face. He chuckled, then headed for Mai City’s government office.

At noon, a new, white notice appeared outside the government office. It bore a description of Xiang Shu’s attire and appearance.

通關

WANTED: NOTORIOUS ROBBER

To the one who catches the culprit, Dongzhe Joint Venture offers a reward of 50 taels.

When Chen Xing went to the authorities to obtain a customs clearance document and saw that his protector had again become a wanted criminal, he felt conflicted. Xiang Shu had snatched his medicine bag and money, and he hadn't had much to spare in the first place. Had he robbed the bank for travel expenses? Where was he planning to go? From the looks of it, he was heading north. Was he planning to return to his tribe?

"You can't head north!" the official told him. "All the roads have been sealed. Next!"

"I have to go to Chang'an no matter what. Here are the documents issued by Lord Xie An of the Ministry of Official Personnel Affairs. Could I please trouble you for this favor?"

"It's not that I won't let you go," said the official. "Xiangyang City has fallen. If you head north, you'll die."

"There is a plank road on Longzhong Mountain, to the west of Xiangyang City," said a man's voice from behind Chen Xing. "After you leave the mountains, keep heading north past Xingzhou. Cross the Wu Pass, and you'll be able to enter the Central Plains. If you head northwest from there, you'll reach Chang'an."

Chen Xing looked back and saw that it was the robust man in the bamboo hat again. The man bowed slightly to look at him. His bamboo hat shielded his face from the sun, so Chen Xing couldn't see his features clearly.

The official pursed his lips and signaled for them to look at the white notice in the government office's courtyard. "A thousand-year-old tomb was excavated and plundered on Longzhong Mountain," he said. "The thieves have occupied the mountain and are wreaking havoc there, so the plank road is currently impassable. We've also recruited Jianghu experts in Xingzhou to root them out.

“Just two days ago, a party was dispatched to investigate, but none of them have returned. Take my advice; don’t go to your death. What do you want to do in Chang’an at a time like this? The two countries are engaged in a vicious war. If you, a Han, went to Chang’an, you’d be trampled by the Hu people. They’d treat you like a two-legged lamb. It wasn’t easy for your parents to raise you. Just head south.”

Eventually, however, Chen Xing wore the official down. The official couldn’t convince him, so he had to stamp the customs clearance document.

“I’m going to Chang’an, too,” the martial artist said. “Add me in. My name is Feng Qianjun.”

I’ve finally met someone normal, thought Chen Xing. He took the document and left, and the martial artist took off his bamboo hat under the warm spring sun.

In that moment, a spring breeze blew by, the thick layers of clouds dispersed, and the long-lost sun cast out several rays of warm, heavenly light from the gap. All Chen Xing could see was the martial expert’s bright countenance: the high bridge of his nose, his fair skin, and his vermillion lips that were as red as a cinnabar dot. Although his blue robe looked shabby, it had the subtle elegance of a prince’s clothes. He stood in front of the government office with his arms crossed, illuminated by the light cast down on him. It made Chen Xing feel as warm in his heart as the spring breeze did.

With a casual air, the martial expert rubbed the indistinct beard on his cheeks. “A chance meeting means it’s fate. Xiaoxiongdi,[18] I’ll have to trouble you to take care of me on our journey. Come, since we’re not in a hurry to leave, let’s get some wine first to drink on the way. May I know how you’re addressed in the Jianghu?”

“Let me introduce myself: My name is Chen Xing. I’m sixteen years old this year, five foot eight, 143 pounds.”

“Then I will introduce myself as well. I’m twenty-two this year, six foot six, and I’m not sure how many pounds I am. I haven’t weighed myself in a long time…”

Feng Qianjun had a refined look, and his words carried a tinge of chivalrous spirit. He purchased about two pints of wine and placed them in his horse's saddle bag while Chen Xing bought a horse from the market. Chen Xing picked up the dog, its tail wagging all the while, and put it in the saddle bag as well. With the dog peeking out of the saddle bag, they departed for Longzhong Mountain as new friends. Feng Qianjun was an easygoing person with a humorous conversational style. He carried a broadsword and always had a wine bowl with him. A young native of Huainan, he practiced martial arts and was exceptionally skilled.

Why couldn't Chen Xing have *this* man as his protector?

"What's the name of your dog?" Feng Qianjun asked.

Chen Xing opened his mouth to say that he had picked it up along the way so it didn't have a name, but then he abruptly changed his mind. "It's called Xiang Shu."

"It even has a surname!"

"Uh-huh."

"So, Tianchi, what do you do for a living?" Feng Qianjun looked him up and down—this boy didn't seem like an ordinary traveler. Nowadays, anyone on the run looked unkempt, but Chen Xing's appearance was tidy from head to toe, and even his dog wore a mink coat. Logically speaking, however, if he were the pampered son of some wealthy family, he'd have someone watching out for him in such troubled times. Otherwise, he could easily be murdered.

"Oh, don't ask," Chen Xing said. "It's a sad affair, so it's best not to mention it. What about you?"

Feng Qianjun turned onto a small path. "I'm a professional assassin," he said earnestly.

Chen Xing was flabbergasted. Why did he keep meeting murderers? It made him nervous; he couldn't help it. He really hoped he hadn't run into another rabid dog like Xiang Shu.

"How many people have you killed?" he asked worriedly.

“I haven’t killed anyone yet,” replied Feng Qianjun. “It’s my first year as a hitman, and I’m currently heading to my destination to complete my very first job.”

“Oh.” That made Chen Xing feel more at ease.

“I’m going to Chang’an to kill Fu Jian.”

“I wish you a quick success on your mission, Feng-xiong! Wait, kill Fu Jian? How much would you be paid for that?”

If his services weren’t too expensive, maybe Chen Xing could hire him to capture Xiang Shu. He didn’t require Xiang Shu killed; just tying him up would suffice. It was no wonder that the Jin had wanted to torture him; even Chen Xing wanted to beat him up. By this point, he’d already tied Xiang Shu up and whipped him countless times in his head.

“A basket of steamed buns,” Feng Qianjun replied.

“Very good.” Chen Xing was satisfied. “I’ll pay you with two baskets of steamed buns. Could you help me catch Xiang Shu?”

“Why do you want to catch your own dog? Isn’t it right here?” Feng Qianjun asked, baffled. Chen Xing explained that Xiang Shu was the one who had robbed the bank, and Feng Qianjun immediately said, “It can’t be done.”

“Three baskets of steamed buns,” Chen Xing countered.

“It’s not about the number of steamed buns. I can’t beat him. Even if I tried, I’d just embarrass you.”

Chen Xing was too stunned to speak. Feng Qianjun went on to explain how difficult it was to make more than thirty gold ingots fly to their intended targets and knock them all unconscious with just a shake of a bundle. Having seen Xiang Shu pull that off firsthand, Feng Qianjun felt ashamed of his inferiority, to say the least. Apparently, when Xiang Shu flung that tael of gold at Chen Xing, it had required almost all of Feng Qianjun’s strength to stop it with the black iron wine bowl.

And Xiang Shu had done all that with ease. He and Feng Qianjun were clearly on different levels.

Chen Xing, who had no comprehension of martial prowess whatsoever, pondered this. “Oh, is he that strong?”

“That man’s name is Xiang Shu, huh?” Feng Qianjun murmured. “Where exactly did he come from?”

They entered Longzhong Mountain on horseback. Following a cold spell in late spring, the ice in the gorges below the mountains had cracked and the blanket of snow over the treetops and branches had melted. All living things revived and flourished, and the plants slowly woke from their slumber. Chen Xing held the reins of his horse in front of the several-hundred-year-old plank road. Chen Xing decided that, having traveled with Feng Qianjun the entire way, he might as well come clean about everything that had happened on his journey.

When he heard about what happened in Xiangyang City, Feng Qianjun sighed. “Zhu Xu, huh?”

“He’s a good man,” Chen Xing said. “It’s a pity that didn’t help him in the end.”

It wasn’t that Chen Xing didn’t want to help Zhu Xu defend the city, but his mission as an exorcist was more important to him.

But to his surprise, Feng Qianjun said, “Zhu Xu, uh, defected.”

“Ah?” Chen Xing found himself at a loss. The Jin court would curse Zhu Xu to death, but there were many men who had defected to the enemy since ancient times, so what was one more?

“An exorcist.” Feng Qianjun contemplated this for a while, then nodded. “So Xiang Shu is the protector you selected.”

“You believe me?” Chen Xing asked, surprised.

“Of course I do. Why wouldn’t I? A liar’s eyes always give them away. But now that your protector has run off, what are you doing going to Chang’an alone?”

“I need to find what remains of the Exorcism Department’s headquarters from the Han dynasty. I was planning to fork out some cash to

hire bodyguards, but with you accompanying me on the road, I can save that money."

When exorcism flourished during the Han Dynasty, an office was established in Chang'an. Some information must have been left behind at the bureau. Originally, this was to have been Chen Xing's next step after finding his protector. He wanted to see if there were any clues he could follow regarding the phenomenon from three hundred years ago—the Silence of All Magic.

"I also wanted to advise Fu Jian to stop killing people along the way," Chen Xing added, "but you're going to kill him, so I won't waste time trying to persuade a dead man."

Feng Qianjun's heart was as clear and bright as a mirror. "Even if Fu Jian dies," he said casually, "the northern wars won't stop unless someone unifies the world."

They chatted for a while and began guessing at Xiang Shu's origins again. Chen Xing knew nothing about the Jianghu of the Central Plains, so Feng Qianjun had no clues to work with, but he was very curious and asked many questions about exorcists. In his time studying at Mount Hua, Chen Xing had learned a lot of magic from books, but of course, it was all limited to theory. The world's spiritual qi used to be abundant worldwide; exorcists borrowed it and converted it for their use, which was how magic could exist in the first place. But ever since the Silence of All Magic, they couldn't use any of it.

"All I can do is glow a bit." Chen Xing demonstrated this power to Feng Qianjun. "I can provide you with some light when we're walking at night, so we won't need to use lanterns. But if I use it for too long, I'll feel drained and start gasping for breath."

Feng Qianjun didn't seem very surprised. "I've seen it in Huainan before," he said. "Someone could chop off his arm and put it back on again. They could even twist their head until it faced backward. Can you…?"

"Stop! Those are Jianghu arts!" Chen Xing quickly stopped Feng Qianjun's attempt to twist his head around. "You can try it if you want, but once you twist it, my neck will break!"

“Why do you want to carry such a heavy burden?” Feng Qianjun asked. “Who are you doing this for?”

“Just listen to yourself. Once Mara descends, the Divine Land will be destroyed, and all the beauty in this world will be gone. Wouldn’t that be a pity?”

Just as Feng Qianjun intended to kill Fu Jian for a mere basket of steamed buns, Chen Xing had decided to shoulder this responsibility after his shifu’s death without seriously thinking it through. His reasoning was straightforward: If nothing else, he didn’t want all the flowers, plants, birds, insects, fish, and people who were alive to die of unnatural causes. People always wanted to cherish beautiful things. Who wouldn’t be upset to see them destroyed for no reason?

They led their horses down the plank road. The path became extremely narrow as they approached the gap. There was a torn piece of clothing from a Jin soldier snagged on the rocks. Seeing it, Feng Qianjun told Chen Xing to stop and went to inspect the cloth; the troops that Mai City’s government had dispatched to scout for news should have passed by this place not too long ago.

As the day approached its end, the valley was tranquil, and no sounds could be heard. Chen Xing looked up and spotted a human figure flash by at the top of the cliff wall.

Something was wrong. “Feng-xiong?”

Feng Qianjun snatched Chen Xing’s collar and dragged him three feet back, and not a moment too soon. Two bodies fell straight down from above the gap. The first smashed directly into the weakest part of the wooden road, splintering it apart with an audible crack. The body and several pieces of broken wood tumbled down the cliff with no end in sight.

The other man landed in front of Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun. Their horses squealed loudly and tried to flee, but Feng Qianjun immediately grabbed the reins and stabilized their mounts. Chen Xing almost cried out too, but Feng Qianjun covered his mouth and whispered, “Don’t be afraid! He’s already dead!”

Chen Xing caught his breath. Looking closer, he saw that the figure in front of them was, in fact, a corpse with blood streaming from its nose, mouth, ears, and eyes. Someone had thrown it down from the top of the gap.

Chen Xing couldn’t even form a response. He and Feng Qianjun looked up at the same time. Chen Xing wanted to start cursing, but Feng Qianjun raised his hand to signal him to keep silent.

Chen Xing thought of the human figure he had just seen flashing past. He nodded. “Somebody’s up there.”

Feng Qianjun said, “Let’s talk after we’re off this road.”

Chapter 6

DESPITE THE BROKEN PLANKS, they were able to traverse the path along the cliff face, leaving the narrow gorge behind them and reaching higher ground. While Chen Xing sat for a brief rest, Feng Qianjun turned back to drag the corpse over and began to inspect it. It belonged to a Jin soldier. The grievous fall had left it soft and limp, and it had long since turned ice cold.

"This soldier was already dead when his corpse was thrown off the cliff," Feng Qianjun pointed out. "Can you figure out what the cause of death was?"

Together, they inspected the corpse thoroughly but found no knife or arrow wounds on the body at all. There were no purplish-black bruises around his neck to indicate strangulation, either.

"It might have been poison," Chen Xing mused. "But he died too long ago to tell. We'll have to find a coroner to get a good idea of what happened. Was the person who threw the corpse off the cliff trying to destroy all traces of the body?"

The corpse's face was frozen in a twisted grimace of horror. He had been frightened as he died, but terror was hardly unusual for someone who was about to die an unnatural death, so that didn't tell them much. The only thing they could ascertain was that he had been dead for at least two days; his face was covered in a layer of white frost, and the only reason his corpse had not yet started to decay was the cold weather. Interestingly, this timeline matched up with what the official in the city had told them.

Feng Qianjun said, "I'll go search up top and see if I can find any clues. You wait here. If someone comes by, just shout. I'll be able to see you."

"That won't be a problem," said Chen Xing. "I've always had really good luck, so nothing will happen to me any time soon. Even that corpse missed me on the way down."

Feng Qianjun grabbed an iron crossbow and buckled a slender steel saber to his waist, then started to clamber up the cliffside. At Chen Xing's words, however, he turned around. "My guess is that the one who threw the corpse knew we were down there and didn't intend to hit you," he said, leaving Chen Xing bewildered.

He sped nimbly up the cliff, first jumping onto a boulder, then turning around to leap to another protruding crag that was a few feet above the first. Step by step, he climbed, until he finally leaped to the top of the narrow canyon.

Chen Xing was still pondering Feng Qianjun's words: *They knew that we were down there and didn't intend to hit me?* What was that supposed to mean? Then realization dawned: Was the person who threw the corpse trying to warn them not to pass through this place?

For some reason, Chen Xing felt as if a pair of eyes was constantly watching him from the shadows.

Feng Qianjun waved at him from his vantage point, and Chen Xing waved back.

"Did you find anything?" Chen Xing shouted, but Feng Qianjun didn't answer, and when Chen Xing looked again, he had disappeared. Apprehensiveness set in, but before long, Feng Qianjun appeared again on another path down from the precipice, the reins of a warhorse in his grasp.

Chen Xing breathed a sigh of relief. Feng Qianjun noticed his expression and understood that Chen Xing had been worried, yet he laughed. "What's wrong? Tianchi, were you worried that something might have happened to me?"

"Of course! It's dangerous to go alone on such a desolate mountain."

"We met by chance and we haven't even known each other for twelve hours, you brat."

Chen Xing didn't know why, but he felt a little embarrassed. Feng Qianjun lifted the corpse with one arm and slung it over the horse, securing it tightly to its back. Then he patted the horse's flank. "Go! Take him back to Mai City! Mai City! Yah!"

The horse ran off, taking the corpse with it.

Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun started a fire at the foot of the mountain, where they were sheltered from the wind. They decided they'd spend the night out in the open, then figure out what to do the following morning after they made it off the mountain.

Chen Xing stared into the bonfire, and for a while, they were both silent, lost in their own thoughts. Then Chen Xing asked, "Feng-xiong, what are you thinking about?"

"I'm thinking about how that person died," Feng Qianjun said lightly, the bonfire illuminating his face. "What about you?"

"Me too." They hadn't had much time to spare then, and it wouldn't have been appropriate to disrobe a soldier who had sacrificed his life in the line of duty for a more detailed inspection. "It could have been a very small weapon. Some assassination tools are poisonous and can achieve that kind of effect."

Feng Qianjun frowned deeply. "Ah well, let's just sleep for now. Xiandi,[19] I may not be as skilled in martial arts as that protector of yours, but I am still somewhat capable. Stick close to me when you sleep tonight. There's no need to feel afraid."

But Chen Xing wasn't particularly afraid. His luck had withstood the test of time. No matter what enemies he faced, he wouldn't have to lift a finger; the heavens themselves would do the dirty work for him. When he was headed south into Xiangyang, the city had been under such a heavy siege that not even a mouse could have made it in or out. Chen Xing spent a long time waiting, but he couldn't find a way in, so he took a desperate gamble. In the middle of the night, he held up a lamp that he'd picked up from somewhere and ran straight toward the flat plains outside the city—which was of the highest military importance in Jingzhou—as if he planned to conquer it by force.

Indeed, this foolish, absurd action attracted the attention of the enemy's two hundred thousand soldiers. The Qin army immediately sent out a hundred-man squad to chase him, but in the end, all their arrows either missed or were blown away by the wind. As Chen Xing ran, he even got lost and couldn't figure out where he was going, and he dashed to the frozen river outside the city with a hundred cavalrymen on his heels. He slid and skidded over the ice, but the cavalrymen pursuing him were so heavy that they broke through, and all of them plummeted into the water.

As soon as he reached the other side of the river, Chen Xing found a ladder someone had put up. Now that he thought about it, it had probably been a wooden ladder the enemy secretly set up to break the siege. He swiftly climbed the ladder, and when he arrived at the top of the city wall, there wasn't a single city guard in sight. Meanwhile, the Qin troops had pursued him to the bottom of the watchtower; Chen Xing pushed the ladder over, sending even more soldiers into the frozen river. At last, he fixed his hair and straightened his robes before nonchalantly jumping down from the city wall and strolling serenely into the city.

All his life, any time Chen Xing ran into some sort of trouble, his monologue would always go something like this: "Oh? There's a ladder here! That's great! There's a horse here; that's great! That's great! That's great!" Amid all these celebratory exclamations, any enemies who dared to confront him found themselves doomed to pants-wetting plights of terror and crushing defeats that sent them running with their tails between their legs.

Still thinking, Chen Xing turned around. Feng Qianjun was sleeping with his back to him, so Chen Xing reached out and began to touch and pinch every part of Feng Qianjun's arm. Feng Qianjun was speechless.

"Feng-xiong, your arm's pretty firm," said Chen Xing. "It'd probably take a lot of effort to perform acupuncture on you."

Feng Qianjun was a little embarrassed. "Really?"

Chen Xing murmured an agreement, continuing down to casually touch Feng Qianjun's chest. For eight years in the mountains he had studied

medicine, including acupoint recognition, practicing first on a wooden doll and then on his shifu. Every person's build was different, and so was the alignment of their muscles, so the locations of acupoints also tended to vary. Chen Xing's shifu had been ill for a long time, so his body was on the thin side; it certainly wasn't as strong as Feng Qianjun's, whose arms and chest felt like they held a great amount of latent power.

"Xiandi, we've only known each other for a day," Feng Qianjun reminded him again. "Aren't we moving a little too quickly?"

"Oh." Chen Xing, who was pinching the acupoint on Feng Qianjun's shoulder, withdrew his hand. "I didn't have any ulterior motives. I was just curious."

"What are you curious about?" said Feng Qianjun. "I'm about nine inches long, but under normal circumstances, I'm not quite four inches."

Chen Xing didn't understand what he was referring to. "You're not a killer, Feng-xiong," he said. "You lied to me."

Feng Qianjun was taken aback. His eyes glinted with a dangerous light, though Chen Xing, who was behind him, could not see them. Outwardly, he laughed. "And how would you know?"

"You don't have a killer's arms or chest. My shifu was a professional assassin, but his stature differed from yours in many ways."

Feng Qianjun turned around. "There are also differences between killers," he told Chen Xing. "The martial arts techniques we practice are different."

"Mm." Chen Xing didn't continue this line of questioning, instead closing his eyes. For his part, Feng Qianjun was beginning to feel uneasy, but it seemed that Chen Xing wasn't too concerned about the lie he'd exposed. He was the first to fall asleep.

A gust of wind began to blow. Feng Qianjun abruptly opened his eyes and sniffed, glancing northward. The Big Dipper in the sky had descended to the horizon line, which meant it was just past the zi hour,[20] and there was a strange scent on the wind. He sat up straight, and when he turned around to check, Chen Xing was still sound asleep.

The scent was getting stronger; it was coming upwind of them. Feng Qianjun slowly pulled out his saber, keeping it raised as he looked around, then walked in the direction the odor was coming from. The two horses, tied to a nearby tree, were also growing agitated, detecting that something was amiss.

Something rustled quietly in the undergrowth. Feng Qianjun stopped in front of the shrubs and drew a dagger with his free hand when, soundlessly, a figure lunged at him.

Feng Qianjun wasted no time: He struck with his saber, cutting into the black figure's chest like a streak of lightning slashing open a stormy sky. He disengaged and leaped backward at once, stabbing behind him with the dagger in his left hand to strike his other attacker's neck.

But something was wrong. The saber in his right hand had gone straight through his enemy's heart, a vital point and a blow that should have been lethal. Similarly, he had stabbed his dagger directly through the second assailant's throat. Both moves had been meticulously calculated and should have ended his enemies' lives instantly, but they seemed completely unaffected by the sharp blades penetrating their vital organs. The one behind him wrapped an arm around Feng Qianjun's neck while the one in front tightly grasped the lower half of his body.

The stench of decaying corpses hit Feng Qianjun, making his eyes go wide, and his attackers' faces resolved into those of deceased Jin soldiers.

The dead, alive again?!

The arm around his neck was cutting off his air; he couldn't make a sound, much less call out to wake up Chen Xing. He raised a foot to kick the living corpse in front of him, and there was a muffled thud as his foot connected—the sound of his opponent's bones cracking as he sent the corpse flying down the mountainside.

He had dealt with the one in front of him, but the grip around his neck grew tighter and tighter. A huge mouth, dripping with rotten blood, was less than three inches from his cheek, and it gaped wide as it prepared to bite down on his neck—

It was then that Chen Xing's dog woke up. It ran over, teeth bared, growling and barking at the living corpse. Feng Qianjun turned and lifted the corpse up into the air, but its arm around his neck didn't loosen at all. He slammed the monstrous corpse into the ground, fracturing the dead man's arm, and still its grip wouldn't loosen. The kind of moves he used on living people were useless against a monster that did not fear pain!

"Chen…" Feng Qianjun choked out, signaling the dog to hurry and wake his master up.

The two frightened horses finally broke free of their reins and fled, disappearing into the night. Chen Xing was a sound sleeper—even peals of thunder usually weren't enough to wake him. Feng Qianjun grappled with the living corpse, wrestling just three steps away from him, yet all Chen Xing did was roll over to face away from them. The living corpse wrapped both hands around Feng Qianjun's neck and both legs around his waist as if it was trying to take possession of his body. It opened its mouth several times to try and bite him, but Feng Qianjun managed to dodge each of its attempts.

The living corpse, clinging to him like a maggot, had Feng Qianjun's neck in a stranglehold, and he struggled to crawl toward Chen Xing, on the verge of passing out. Finally, he managed to grab the mat that Chen Xing was lying on and yanked it away violently.

Chen Xing rolled over and hit his head against a stone on the ground. He woke with a loud yelp. "Feng-xiong?"

The dog barked. "Woof! Woof! Woof!" Feng Qianjun couldn't get enough air to respond.

"Ahhh!" Chen Xing yelped. "What *is* that?! A drought fiend?!"

Feng Qianjun's vision was going dark around the edges as he continued to try and pry the living corpse's hands off his neck. Chen Xing rushed forward. "Stop barking! Is that a drought fiend? Feng-xiong, what are you doing?"

Feng Qianjun pointed to the living corpse's arm with one finger and gritted his teeth; he was about to pass out. Chen Xing hurried forward to help wrench the living corpse away. In response, the living corpse growled

darkly and tried to bite him. Chen Xing snatched his hand back with a shout. “A drought fiend! A living drought fiend! Wait, no, that’s not a good description. It’s a monster!”

Feng Qianjun didn’t have enough air to come up with a retort.

Chen Xing picked up a rock and forcefully smashed the living corpse’s fingers with it. Feng Qianjun had already run out of air and gestured at him, meaning, “Hurry up and run. Leave me here.” With the last of his strength, he moved to slam the drought fiend into the cliff face.

“Wait!” Chen Xing looked back to see a dagger lodged in the living corpse’s neck. He reached forward, pulled it out, and did his best to hack away at its arm. The bonfire had gone out and left their surroundings pitch black, so he couldn’t see a thing. Chen Xing took a deep breath and lit up the Heart Lamp. A resplendent white light shot out from his hand to illuminate the face of the living corpse, which howled in terror.

It was afraid of the Heart Lamp’s light. It raised both arms to shield itself from the light, and as it released its grip, Feng Qianjun broke free with a thunderous roar. He threw the living corpse over his shoulder and brutally hurled it against a jutting crag.

Before Chen Xing could process what had happened, Feng Qianjun shouted, “Get back!” He had flung the living corpse with a great deal of his strength, and it slammed into the cliffside. Its brains splattered across the rock, giving off a foul stench, and its body went limp as it died for the second time.

“Where did that monster come from?” Chen Xing panted.

Feng Qianjun coughed as he gasped for air. Chen Xing was about to move closer when Feng Qianjun grabbed him and said, “We can’t linger here. Let’s go!”

“Wait! I have to take a closer look. I’ve never seen a drought fiend before. Where on earth did it come from?”

The existence of drought fiends had been recorded in many ancient texts. According to legend, ancient corpses that did not rot for years after they died would turn into walking corpses—drought fiends. This wasn’t the

first time Chen Xing had encountered a yao; it was just that whenever he saw one in the flesh, he couldn't help but feel curious. Feng Qianjun, on the other hand, felt that what had happened far exceeded the limits of what he could accept as normal. His eyes were filled with shock, and he kept breathing heavily.

Suddenly, the dog started barking in the direction of the woods again.

"There's a lot more of them over there," Feng Qianjun said. "Are you sure you want to study this one right now?"

Turning around, Chen Xing saw forty or so living corpses emerging both from up the mountain and from down at the mountain's base. Some of the corpses were relatively well-preserved while others wore tattered rags. He couldn't tell how long they had been dead, but they all swayed unsteadily from side to side as they stumbled toward Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun.

Chen Xing quickly changed his tune. "No, it's all right, there are too many. Maybe next time."

"Then why aren't you running yet?!"

The two of them turned and sprinted away in the opposite direction. Feng Qianjun was so fast that in the blink of an eye, he was already thirty feet ahead of Chen Xing. From the way Chen Xing kept looking back as he ran, Feng Qianjun realized that this kid didn't practice martial arts and couldn't run very fast. He immediately turned back to rescue him, but several living corpses appeared before he could reach him, blocking Chen Xing's path forward and pouncing on him.

Chen Xing had no chance to yell his head off this time. He came to a screeching halt, then turned around to dash to the bottom of a cliff. Feng Qianjun raced back toward him. Reaching the cliff, Chen Xing grabbed a withered vine hanging against the cliff face and started climbing—but a living corpse had already caught up to him, so Feng Qianjun had to rush over and save him. Chen Xing was halfway up when he tugged the vine with too much force and sent the massive stone holding it in place thundering down.

“Watch out!” Feng Qianjun shouted. Hearing the warning, Chen Xing fell sideways to dodge, swinging through the air on his vine rope. The massive rock came tumbling down, first crushing the three living corpses beneath Chen Xing and then continuing down the slope with a loud rumble. It knocked over a whole row of living corpses, crushing them all, before it rolled down to a lower slope and vanished.

On the cliffside road, Feng Qianjun was surrounded by a circle of living corpses, his only weapon the dagger in his hand. He surveyed his surroundings. Chen Xing, having escaped his predicament, quickly flattened himself against the ground, hiding from the corpses’ line of sight. “Glow!” Feng Qianjun shouted. “They’re afraid of light!”

Chen Xing immediately put his right hand over the left side of his chest, but just before he could release the Heart Lamp, another figure swept past the corpses with a swift gust of wind. There were the whooshing sounds of a blade slicing through the air, and a ring-pommel blade glimmered with a cold light as it cut the living corpses in two. The saber went flying toward Feng Qianjun, who caught it; it was the weapon that he had dropped at the foot of the slope.

“Thanks!” Feng Qianjun said.

When their savior’s face came into view, Chen Xing’s heart jolted. “Xiang Shu?! What are you doing here?”

Xiang Shu leaped, empty-handed, over the shrubs as he led the way, dashing toward the cliff.

Chen Xing suddenly remembered the corpses that had been thrown down in front of them the previous day. “Were you the one who wanted us to take a detour?” he asked.

Xiang Shu stopped at the foot of the cliff and glanced at Chen Xing. “Wait here, don’t leave just yet. Get off the mountain at dawn.”

Then he turned around and went back the way he came.

“Where are you going?” Chen Xing shouted, but before he could give chase, Feng Qianjun grabbed him.

“What was that?” he demanded. “Explain!”

“It’s too complicated to explain,” said Chen Xing. “There’s something suspicious about all of this!”

He told Feng Qianjun of the legend that said that corpses that didn’t rot for a long time turned into drought fiends. However, the ancient texts did not record the reasons for their transformation. All Chen Xing knew was that when drought fiends appeared in the world, severe droughts occurred all across the land. Droughts in the Divine Land, both major and minor, had been persistent for more than a hundred and sixty years. Longzhong Mountain was a uniquely blessed spot in the human world, so what ominous future lay in wait if drought fiends were appearing here?

And why was Xiang Shu here? Chen Xing was adamant about following him. With Sui Xing’s protection, nothing should happen to him, as long as he was careful. But if he didn’t follow Xiang Shu, then Xiang Shu could end up in even more danger.

Chapter 7

FENG QIANJUN INSPECTED the corpses strewn across the ground. Each one had been cleaved cleanly in two with one swift swing of Xiang Shu's saber, but they were still alive. Even with their heads detached from their bodies, their severed limbs continued to twitch and spasm. It made Feng Qianjun's scalp tingle.

"Hey!" Feng Qianjun called out urgently, spotting Chen Xing darting into the woods after Xiang Shu. "Don't go!"

Chen Xing glanced back. "I need to check on that bastard! I'm an exorcist, I'll be fine! Wait here for me!"

Feng Qianjun sheathed his saber. He was about to chase after Chen Xing when he heard the distant sound of hooves striking the ground. Instead, he darted into the bushes to hide, ready to launch a sneak attack if necessary.

The newcomers, however, turned out to be a group of Jin soldiers. Their leader swiftly dismounted his horse, torch in hand, as they arrived at the center of the small battlefield.

"There are some here, too…" The leader's voice trembled. "Who killed them?"

"What's here?" Feng Qianjun asked from behind him as he pressed his saber against the leader's neck.

The soldiers were caught off guard. "Who are you?!" they yelled in unison.

"Speak," Feng Qianjun said coldly. "Has the government known of the abnormalities in this place for a long time?"

The leader gasped. "You…killed all these monsters? How many more did you see?" With a subtle motion of his wrist, Feng Qianjun sliced a gash in the leader's neck. Blood spurted, and the leader, terrified, began to tremble. "I'll talk! I'll talk! Don't kill me!"

“When did it start?” Feng Qianjun demanded. “Talk as you walk!” Then, to Chen Xing’s dog, he said, “Xiang Shu, wait here.”

“More…more than a month ago.” The leader shivered. “Two villagers f-fled Longzhong Village. They went to Mai City to report the case to the authorities, but none of the officials believed them. They thought it was just the Qin army’s plan to create a diversion and lure the soldiers away…”

Chen Xing ran in the direction Xiang Shu had left, hot on his trail. The road led into the woods and then wound toward the deepest part of the mountains. As he made a turn around the mountain slope, he saw a village lying below.

A question mark appeared over his head. *There’s a village here?*

He didn’t see so much as a gleam of light within it. It was already cockcrow, yet a deathly silence hung over the village. Chen Xing lit up the Heart Lamp in his left hand and pushed open the door of a house with his right. There was no one there, and no corpses. It was as if the entire village had been evacuated overnight.

Where was everyone? Where did they all go? Chen Xing closed his eyes and faced all four directions in turn. Suddenly, he sensed a flash of light.

He was now almost certain that the Heart Lamp was guiding him to Xiang Shu. Xiang Shu was the Protector Martial God chosen by the Heart Lamp, there was no mistake about that! Doubt piled on top of doubt in Chen Xing’s heart, but the only person who could resolve it was Xiang Shu.

The light was to the north, where another winding path led to higher ground on the northern side of the village. Chen Xing hurried over and arrived at a cemetery.

The center of the cemetery had been excavated, exposing dozens of stone coffins. In the midst of it all was a stone platform and standing before it was a masked man in black robes, whose silhouette blended seamlessly into the pitch-black night.

On the stone platform lay a towering warrior nearly seven feet tall, clad in black iron armor from head to toe with an iron helmet that covered his head. He was surrounded by wandering, ghostly figures—which closer inspection revealed to be standing, living corpses.

Another group of living corpses stood at the periphery; they were dressed in civilian clothes, while the inner circle comprised a dozen or so Jin army soldiers. As Chen Xing looked on, a chilling realization struck him: the masked man had somehow enacted a sinister ritual here, transforming all the villagers into “drought fiends.” Even the Jin army soldiers who came to investigate had met with this horrifying fate!

Drawing a connection between this and the drought fiends he had encountered earlier that night, Chen Xing speculated that perhaps the fiends he saw were their patrolling soldiers…except silence had already fallen on all magic, and the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth had been exhausted. Who was this masked man? What kind of magic was he using?

An idea struck Chen Xing. He turned to the other side of the cemetery and spotted Xiang Shu kneeling behind a stone tablet, signaling urgently for Chen Xing to crouch down and avoid detection. Chen Xing swiftly obeyed and made his way to Xiang Shu under the cover of the cemetery’s low outer wall, which was barely waist height.

“Who is he?” Chen Xing whispered.

Xiang Shu remained silent, his brow furrowed in deep concentration as he watched the masked man perform a ritual on the stone platform. The man stood perfectly still, surrounded by silently shuffling living corpses; it created an eerie tableau.

Chen Xing tried again. “What does he intend to do?”

“I don’t know!” Xiang Shu snapped irritably. “Shut up!”

Chen Xing’s doubts peaked. He didn’t possess an ounce of the self-awareness an exorcist should have, much less realize that *he* should be the one answering questions and dispelling doubts at a time like this. “Then how much longer do we need to stay here and watch?” he persisted.

Xiang Shu fell silent, his expression unreadable. Realizing that Xiang Shu might hit him if he kept asking questions, Chen Xing shut his mouth.

They were hiding behind a stone tablet, and the row of cinnabar characters inscribed on it drew Chen Xing's attention. Gently tracing the sunken characters, he recognized the eight words: "The Xiangyang Prince Wei of the Great Jin."

Sima Wei? Was the person buried in this cemetery the Prince of Chu from the royal Sima clan, who died in the War of the Eight Princes?!

Chen Xing quickly looked back to the center of the stone platform, where the corpse lay flat on its back in opulent black iron armor. Such armor wasn't meant for a civilian; it had to be Sima Wei's body!

But he's been dead for nearly a hundred years! Chen Xing thought. *His corpse hasn't decayed yet?*

As he watched, the sorcerer lifted his hands slightly, and Sima Wei's heavy body rose into the air. A powerful, invisible gale whipped up around them, making Chen Xing shiver—it was the dreaded Yin wind described in ancient lore. Only an exorcist like him would recognize it as the manifestation of lingering resentment in the world. Ordinary people experiencing this frigid, malevolent gust would merely label it a Yin wind, unaware of its true nature.

The Yin wind intensified, buffeting the accumulated resentment of soldiers who died in battle and civilians lost in the war for a hundred miles around.

Chen Xing's intuition sharpened. The caster's true intention wasn't to manipulate the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth, but to harness the immense resentment that lingered after the devastating war in Xiangyang City; he aimed to imbue Sima Wei's body with this energy to resurrect him. The spell was reaching a critical juncture, and Chen Xing knew he had to act immediately.

"Protector," he whispered, "we have to stop him now!"

Xiang Shu seized Chen Xing's throat as if he were restraining a little chick. "Go by yourself if you want," he whispered, "but don't expose my

position. I’m not your so-called protector.”

Chen Xing clenched his teeth. He couldn’t speak, but his glare was bitter and indignant, and he gestured vehemently to emphasize to Xiang Shu that the situation unfolding before them was already quite grave. *If you aren’t here to stop this actual sorcerer from inflicting disaster on the human world,* he thought, *then what did you run all the way here for?!*

It was then that a large contingent of Jin troops arrived, trailed by Feng Qianjun, who was brandishing knives in both hands. While Feng Qianjun surged toward the cemetery’s edge, nearly fifty Jin soldiers held their torches high, closing in on the cemetery’s periphery with unmistakable momentum.

In an instant, Xiang Shu relinquished his hold on Chen Xing. They gestured in unison at the new arrivals, but it was too late. Trembling with fear, the leader of the Jin troops drew the masked man’s attention. “Sorcerer, where do you hail from?!” His voice quivered. “S-surrender yourself immediately!”

The Jin army leader didn’t see Xiang Shu and Chen Xing’s warning, but Feng Qianjun had. He leaped to find cover behind the outer wall of the cemetery, motioning, *What do we do now?*

Xiang Shu waved his hand and grabbed Chen Xing, who was about to rush out. They heard a derisive chuckle echo from the “sorcerer” in front of the stone platform at the center of the cemetery. The sorcerer muttered something under his breath, and no sooner did Chen Xing hear his voice than nearly a hundred villagers-turned-drought fiends lunged at the Jin troops.

“Charge!” the Jin leader bellowed, rallying his men to charge on foot. They swung their knives and swiftly severed the heads of the living corpses, spilling rotten blood in all directions. Chen Xing glanced over at Feng Qianjun, who wasn’t far away, hidden behind the wall. Feng Qianjun pointed at himself, then nodded at Chen Xing, signaling, *Yes, I taught them that.*

Remembering the living corpses at the cliff’s base whose brains had been smashed, Chen Xing halted abruptly. “Cut off their heads,” he

instructed Xiang Shu urgently. Then he emerged from behind the stone tablet and shouted, “Die, monsters!” But after he’d run a few steps it dawned on him that he was unarmed, and, wheeling around, he sprinted toward the Jin leader. “Give me a sword!”

Feng Qianjun chased after Chen Xing with his saber raised. “Get back! Don’t cause trouble!”

Chen Xing spotted a gravedigging shovel. *Nice!* Following the soldiers, he lifted the iron shovel and smacked it against the head of a living corpse.

Xiang Shu’s gaze remained fixed on the masked man, betraying no concern for the living corpses around them. The masked man raised his hand, and suddenly, Xiang Shu sprang into action. He leaped onto a stone coffin, spun around, landed beside Chen Xing, and kicked Feng Qianjun away. Then he lifted the coffin lid, which must have weighed almost two hundred pounds, with one hand and used it as a shield to protect himself and Chen Xing.

Feng Qianjun had just turned around when he was kicked to the side. Chen Xing, bewildered, looked up to see the masked man in the black robe raise his hand and tap the air gently, stirring up ripples as if the air itself were water. Black flames flickered in his hand and hundreds of black meteors shot out, scattering indiscriminately over the Jin soldiers and living corpses engaged in battle. The moment the black flames touched them, the soldiers howled in pain and dropped to the ground, where they rolled around frantically.

One meteor struck the stone coffin lid and shattered it. Xiang Shu absorbed the shock of the tremendous force, and he leaned down slightly and drew his sword. His figure blurred as he raced onto the altar with a *whoosh*.

Chen Xing gripped his shovel. *He’s so fast! Too fast!* In the blink of an eye, only he, Xiang Shu, and Feng Qianjun remained standing in the cemetery. Everyone else had already fallen to the ground.

“Feng-xiong!” Chen Xing shouted. “Where did they come from?!”

“Don’t touch them!” Feng Qianjun shouted back, though Chen Xing wouldn’t have dared; he’d seen how the flames ignited everyone they touched in a fiery blaze. Then Feng Qianjun stood up and yelled, “Behind you!”

The Jin troops had all fallen, but there were many living corpses still standing. They began to encircle Chen Xing, closing in from all sides.

“Invoke light!” Feng Qianjun shouted to him as he swung his saber and severed the heads of two living corpses. “They’re afraid of light!”

Over at the stone platform, Xiang Shu swung his sword with a resounding buzz, tracing an arc of light. The masked man whipped out his hand, releasing a dagger from his right sleeve. Gleaming with a conch shell’s poisonous hue, the dagger intercepted Xiang Shu’s attack, and a sharp clang rang out as it collided with his sword. Xiang Shu gave his opponent no chance to retaliate, however, and thrust his sword at the man’s throat.

“You’re skilled,” the masked man remarked, his attention split as he directed one hand toward Sima Wei’s body on the stone platform and parried Xiang Shu’s blade with the other. They exchanged three moves in what felt like only an instant. Realizing he couldn’t withstand Xiang Shu’s attacks for much longer, the masked man abruptly changed tack: He straightened his body and ascended into the air. Xiang Shu beat a swift retreat and watched as the masked man hovered ten feet above the ground. The masked man dared not fly too far; his left hand was still directed at Sima Wei’s body, channeling invisible but boundless resentment into the corpse.

Xiang Shu, who was watching the masked man intently, saw the dagger vanish with a flick of the man’s right sleeve and a small iron crossbow appear in its place. Its arrows gleamed sharply, their surface reflecting the chilling light as the levitating man aimed what promised to be a fatal blow at Xiang Shu.

In that moment, Feng Qianjun broke free of the swarm around him and ran to Chen Xing, who was likewise surrounded by living corpses. “Why did you bring so many soldiers with you?” asked Chen Xing.

“They were the ones who knew how to get here,” Feng Qianjun said. “What else could I have done? Why are you meddling in this, anyway?”

Chen Xing flailed his hands. “I’m not meddling! This is my job!”

Suddenly, the light of the Heart Lamp burst forth from Chen Xing’s hand in a flash of resplendent white light. The living corpses scattered, wailing in agony. The masked man, noticing the living corpses being subdued by the burst of white light, turned away from Xiang Shu.

“Get rid of them!” Feng Qianjun yelled. “Quickly!”

Though he was under no immediate threat, Chen Xing brandished the shovel in his right hand and the Heart Lamp in his left. His plan was to use the shovel to strike at the heads of the living corpses, but there was no need; the instant the white light from the Heart Lamp illuminated them, the creatures instinctively scattered. Chen Xing swung his shovel at them, but all he hit was empty air: Before long he realized that the living corpses would hastily flee from wherever he went. He couldn’t get close to any of them. In the blink of an eye, chaos had descended on the cemetery; it was like watching a wolf rampaging among a herd of sheep, with chickens squawking and dogs barking everywhere.

“I can’t hit them!” Chen Xing exclaimed in frustration. He was on the verge of extinguishing the Heart Lamp when Feng Qianjun dashed to the forefront of the wall and yelled, “Get over here, quickly!”

The scene was truly bizarre: A young man holding an iron shovel aloft while his left hand emitted a bright light, corralling a swarm of living corpses toward the western edge of the cemetery. The corpses clustered together tightly as they squeezed through the narrow passage between two walls with a cacophonous racket. Feng Qianjun’s voice boomed, “On my command, charge!”

Chen Xing broke into a run. With the Heart Lamp gaining speed behind them, the living corpses surged onward with renewed vigor. As they rushed through the narrow passage, Feng Qianjun took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and unleashed a thunderous roar. With his saber held horizontally before him, he descended like a whirlwind to collide head-on with the living corpses, his momentum bolstered by his internal force!

His saber gleamed, and with one swift swing, he severed the heads of nearly sixty living corpses in succession. When the sword was about to reach the astonished Chen Xing, Feng Qianjun simply flicked his wrist to make his saber deviate slightly from its path. The blade came within three inches of Chen Xing's face, brushing past his nose and bringing with it a chilling gust of wind.

Chen Xing was stunned speechless. When he saw the blade coming at his neck, he'd been certain he was about to lose his head too. Feng Qianjun deftly flexed his wrists, flicking all remnants of rotten blood off of his ring-headed saber in a single motion that left the blade's tip gleaming with a clear, cold light.

"Impressive skills," Chen Xing said, heartfelt despite his lingering trepidation. "Amazing!"

"You flatter me," Feng Qianjun replied modestly. "It's only because I have a divine weapon." Before, he'd been caught off guard and failed to counter the sneak attack from the living corpse; now he was prepared and determined not to let it happen again. He swiftly turned around and darted toward Xiang Shu.

Xiang Shu still kept a vigilant eye on the masked man, sensing a hint of fear in him now. Eager to resolve the situation swiftly, the masked man unleashed six hidden arrows, each as thin as a strand of cow's hair, with a single pull of the crossbow's trigger. This was the moment Xiang Shu had been waiting for. Brandishing the longsword in his hand, he successfully deflected every arrow.

"You…" The masked man was stunned into silence. Xiang Shu leaped onto the stone platform and spun swiftly, thrusting his sword at the masked man's left hand. Feng Qianjun followed moments later, taking two steps to leap onto the stone pillar adjacent to the platform. He twisted his saber horizontally and brought it down in a powerful strike aimed at the masked man's neck.

But Xiang Shu's blow only tore the masked man's black robe open—revealing nothing inside but empty cloth. The fabric fluttered and twisted in the air before returning to its original state. The man withdrew and

retreated, and as his mask fell to the ground, a casualty of Feng Qianjun's saber, his true face was finally revealed.

The mask landed with a resounding clang as Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun touched down. Chen Xing rushed to the front of the stone platform and looked up. The man's clear, graceful face sneered down at them, studying them.

Feng Qianjun frowned. "What kind of monster is that?"

"I don't know?" Chen Xing was baffled. "No one here knows him, anyway. What does he need a mask for?"

With a sharp voice and a cold look on his pale face, the man demanded, "Who are you?"

"Who are you?!" Chen Xing retorted.

The man seemed unsure. "Who are you?" he repeated.

"Tell me who you are first!" Chen Xing insisted. "What are you trying to do here?"

Xiang Shu, recognizing the nonsensical and circular conversation that was about to ensue, intervened urgently. "He's stalling! Don't waste time talking to him!"

Chen Xing was sobered by his words. He raised his hand, still enveloped in white light, toward the sky. "Die!"

He gave it everything he had. The Heart Lamp's light erupted into countless particles that diffused like stars in the night sky—but the man responded with a sharp, mocking laugh.

"I'm not another drought fiend, you fool," he sneered, completely unscathed. Chen Xing hadn't anticipated the possibility that this sorcerer might be unaffected by the Heart Lamp's light. The man raised his right hand and shot black flames down at the three of them with a loud blast.

Feng Qianjun and Xiang Shu turned as one and lunged at Chen Xing. Xiang Shu kicked Feng Qianjun away and wrapped one arm around Chen Xing's waist, rolling across the ground with him and taking cover behind the stone platform. Together, they narrowly avoided the black flames. Xiang

Shu pushed Chen Xing behind the stone pillar before turning around and dashing back into the fray.

The crow of a rooster echoed in the distance. Laughing like a madman, the man in the black robe shrieked, “Success!”

Below him, on the central stone platform, black flames erupted from Sima Wei’s body, bursting through the gaps in his armor. With a flash, both flames and armor ascended into the sky and disintegrated into black particles of light that scattered to the northwest.

The marble-white hues of the dawn sky began to emerge in the east. The man in black freed his other hand and shook them both out. He descended slowly with a crossbow in his left hand and a dagger in his right, then faced Xiang Shu, showing no concern for Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun.

“He has no feet,” Feng Qianjun whispered from behind the pillar. “Is he a ghost? How are we supposed to deal with him?”

“I don’t know…” said Chen Xing.

“Aren’t you an exorcist?”

“But I don’t even know what he is!” Chen Xing’s mind raced. He had never encountered such a creature in any of the ancient texts.

Meanwhile, Xiang Shu readied his longsword. “What exactly are you?” he asked, his voice calm.

“I don’t know that myself,” replied the man. “It doesn’t matter. Take…this!”

He lunged at Xiang Shu with incredible speed, and Xiang Shu moved swiftly to block his dagger attack. The bastard could fly freely in the sky and shift around like a ghost! The slashes of his dagger created illusions that worked in tandem with the powerful crossbow in his left hand. No matter how Xiang Shu attempted to strike him down, he only managed to tear at the black robe, leaving the monster beneath unharmed.

Understanding the formidable challenge they faced, Feng Qianjun rushed back into the fray, wielding his long saber with one hand.

There must be a way, Chen Xing thought, still keeping the Heart Lamp aglow, its power flickering in his hand. *What if I applied the magic directly to his face to burn him?*

Suddenly, he noticed something: the iron sword in Xiang Shu's hand was beginning to shimmer in sync with the rhythmic pulses of the Heart Lamp! Xiang Shu came to the same realization and, occupied though he was, spared a glance at Chen Xing.

"Sword!" Xiang Shu shouted.

Feng Qianjun had already rushed forward to sever the lower half of the black-robed man's body. Black flames erupted from under his robe, sweeping across the center of the cemetery. Chen Xing raised his left hand, crouched down, and directed the light toward Xiang Shu.

At once, the iron sword in Xiang Shu's hands shone with a dazzling white light that clashed with the black flames. Like a scorching sun that incinerated everything its rays touched, it repelled the black flames until they almost completely dissipated.

The black-robed man was caught off guard, and before he could jump up to evade the attack, Feng Qianjun leaped off a stone pillar behind him and brought his saber down on the man's head, forcing him back to the ground. Xiang Shu gripped his sword with both hands, swinging it in a dazzling arc. Then he spun around, took a quick step, and thrust the sword forward with a turn of his hand.

The longsword, augmented with the magic of the Heart Lamp, pierced the black-robed man's chest. He let out a blood-curdling scream and began to shake uncontrollably.

"Why…would this light…" he gasped out, but he could speak no further; the black flames beneath him abruptly transformed into a white flare and burst in every direction, reducing him to ashes.

The three of them replied in unison: "Don't know."

"Even if I did know," Chen Xing added, "I wouldn't tell you. You can only blame your own bad luck, I guess."

There was a deafening explosion, and the black-robed man was incinerated into countless particles of light that vanished in a flash. His black robe fell to the ground, igniting in a blazing fire. In the end, all that remained were ashes and dust.

As the crimson sun rose over the edge of Longzhong Mountain, illuminating the cemetery halfway up the mountain, the sorrowful cries of the Jin army faded away. Chen Xing gazed up at Xiang Shu, who stooped to retrieve the mask that had fallen from the black-robed man’s face. Doubts still lingered in his heart.

Chapter 8

EARLY MORNING IN MAI CITY.

“A corpse has transformed!” shouted the panicked voice of someone rushing over. “There’s a mutated corpse in the government office!”

“Don’t spread lies!” said one of the soldiers blocking the entrance to Mai City. They had been tasked with dealing with the surge of people rushing in. “All of you, head back! There’s no such thing! It’s all rumors! Rumors!”

Meanwhile, in the government office, the county magistrate, a group of clerical officials, and a local general were observing the living corpse of a Jin soldier trapped in a hefty metal cage. With turbid eyes, it struggled inside the cage, dragging a chain behind it.

The county magistrate attempted to compose himself. “We must quickly…escort this monster to Jiankang and report to the imperial court.”

“Daren, I think—” began his deputy magistrate, but the county magistrate snapped out of his stupor.

“This matter must not be suppressed!” he barked. “Xiangyang has fallen, and the casualties of war number in the hundreds of thousands. If all their corpses were to transform like this, it won’t matter how many of us are still alive. How can we fight against the dead? Escort it away as soon as possible—then present a memorial to the throne to request the imperial court’s decision!”

At the foot of Longzhong Mountain, to the northwest…

The dog had been waiting all night, and when it saw Chen Xing, it ran over, wagging its tail. Chen Xing, Feng Qianjun, and Xiang Shu stopped for a little while and found a place to sit at the end of the plank road. Feng Qianjun left to search for the horses that had escaped earlier; fortunately, they had not run far. Meanwhile, Xiang Shu took the reins of

the horse he had brought over himself. He stood on the plank road and looked out at the mountainous scenery without uttering a word.

Feng Qianjun exchanged information with the other two. Apparently, the Jin army had already known about the situation in Longzhong Mountain; the people who'd recently fled from the village midway up the mountain wanted to report the case to the authorities in Xiangyang, but with Xiangyang under siege, they'd had to turn to Mai City. However, there was a rumor that the Qin army would unleash a large-scale offensive on Mai City, so its local government was already on tenterhooks. They feared that the villagers' reports of living corpses were a ruse by the enemy to create a diversion. With the villagers also struggling to explain themselves clearly, the matter was temporarily suppressed.

"Until last night, to be exact," Feng Qianjun said. "Incidentally, it has been forty-nine days since the first reports."

Chen Xing took the initiative to greet Xiang Shu, who had his back facing the other two and never once interrupted them. "Do you want to eat something?" Xiang Shu just ignored him. Chen Xing pondered Feng Qianjun's words for a long time. "It's related to the chance number 'seven,'" he said at last, "so there must have been a reason. But you shouldn't have brought them over!"

"I tried to stop them, but it was useless," Feng Qianjun replied.

It was only when the horse returned to Mai City with the dead Jin soldier on its back that the people had finally panicked. It had been two days since the county magistrate dispatched the soldiers to investigate the reports, and they hadn't returned, so when he saw the corpse, the county magistrate knew that the matter could no longer be put off. Within a night, he had sent another party to Longzhong Mountain. Their leader already knew the tomb's location from information they'd obtained previously. Feng Qianjun's intent was to go in alone to assist Chen Xing, but he failed to persuade the others and had to settle for following them.

As a result, all the Jin soldiers died in the line of duty. Once they were rid of the mysterious, black-robed man, Xiang Shu lit a fire and

burned all the corpses.

Chen Xing's only worry now was Sima Wei, who, clad in black armor, had turned into a fiery black meteor at the last moment and flown away. The explanation for this had to be complicated; someone was plotting something somewhere in the Divine Land, and they didn't have the first clue what, who, or where.

Nearly a hundred years prior, the successors of the Jin Dynasty had been fatuous and incompetent. The eight princes each gathered troops and fought over the throne, embroiling the Central Plains in a civil war where the Han people attacked one another. The internal discord was significant, leading to several years of famine and the evacuation of the garrisons outside the five passes. Only twenty or thirty thousand able fighters remained. The Xiongnu seized the opportunity to go south as the pass fell, and the Han gentry took ferries further south, hence the separate governance of the north and south regions.

Historical records showed that Sima Wei, the Prince of Chu, was only twenty-one years old when he died. He had a tall, imposing build and an outstanding countenance, but was executed for "acting on the pretext of an imperial edict," as he had fabricated documents and gathered troops in a crusade against treacherous court officials. After his death, Sima Wei was conferred the posthumous title of General of the Agile Cavalry and buried in Longzhong Mountain, an area in Jingchu, his fiefdom, with outstanding fengshui.

"Xiang Shu, do you know something?" Chen Xing asked. This series of unimaginable events was of secondary importance to him; he was far more concerned with Xiang Shu's identity and motives.

Xiang Shu glanced at Chen Xing, but his attention was elsewhere. "I only took this path to get to Chang'an, but I ended up meddling in other people's business along the way," he replied.

"Why do you want to go to Chang'an?" Chen Xing asked, curious. The barrier between them had broken down somewhat, perhaps because the

three of them had faced a life-and-death situation together the previous night. Or perhaps it was that Xiang Shu's attitude had taken a noticeable turn for the better since Chen Xing's Heart Lamp proved that he was an authentic exorcist.

Xiang Shu turned the mask over and over in his hands as he examined it. When he turned to face Chen Xing, Chen Xing subconsciously leaned closer to Feng Qianjun. He was a little afraid of Xiang Shu, and he steeled himself to protest. "Stop bullying me all the time!"

"Hey!" Feng Qianjun was also a little afraid of Xiang Shu; he couldn't beat him, after all, so he also had to brace himself. "Don't bully little Chen Xing-xiongdi. It's not like he did anything to provoke you."

"Didn't provoke me?" Xiang Shu scoffed. "You Han people don't even know how to distinguish right from wrong. You used deceit to trick me into going to Jiangdong from Jinzhou, then imprisoned me. If Xiangyang City hadn't fallen," he added lightly, "I'd already be dead and rotting at the bottom of a dungeon. All that, and you want *me* to shed tears of gratitude for *you*? Dream on."

Chen Xing's temper flared. "It's not like I had any idea what you went through! And didn't I save you? When did I ever ask you to shed tears of gratitude for me, anyway? Let me ask you this: Did you believe me when I first told you I was an exorcist and you were my protector? How about now? Do you believe me now?"

"You're a Hu?" said Feng Qianjun. He was about to add, *But you don't look like one*, until he saw Xiang Shu's face and promptly choked those words back. He figured Xiang Shu probably didn't like to be questioned about his identity, and he pivoted to a hasty compromise. "Calm down! Don't fight! Since we're all heading to Chang'an, let's go together."

Without saying another word, Xiang Shu mounted his horse. He clamped his legs down on its sides, and before they knew it, he was galloping away.

"Wait!" Chen Xing sputtered, still halfway through devouring his rations. "You haven't told me why you're going to Chang'an…" He put his

dog in the saddlebag while Feng Qianjun packed up, and they spurred their horses to set out.

Xiang Shu rode ahead, keeping his distance from them. Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun were about a hundred feet behind him, talking quietly as they rode their horses side by side.

“Your protector doesn’t appear to be a bad person,” said Feng Qianjun. “Trust me, he won’t stab you with his sword over a minor disagreement.”

“No, he’ll just throw money at me,” replied Chen Xing.

“He threw that gold ingot to test my strength. He had already noticed that I was behind you. Even if you hadn’t dodged it, it wouldn’t have really hit you.”

“I’ll really have to thank him for his mercy, then.” Chen Xing disagreed with Feng Qianjun. *That guy is a bastard; he even stole my stuff.* He frowned as he watched Xiang Shu, who wasn’t far ahead. “Why is he going to Chang’an, anyway?”

“To find people from his tribe. Isn’t that obvious? The Hu people are all in the North, and Fu Jian, the Emperor of Qin, controls Chang’an.”

Chen Xing suddenly recalled the line “speculated to be a military official” on the register Zhu Xu had shown him. Perhaps they had seized some sort of precious item from Xiang Shu when they captured him, to arrive at such a conclusion? What kind of person was he? The commander of a century? A field officer? He couldn’t be a general; he was only twenty, after all.

“However, I don’t think he has any intention of being your protector,” Feng Qianjun added.

“I sensed that long ago,” Chen Xing said insipidly.

Chen Xing pondered Sima Wei’s body, the way it had turned into black flames and flown away. It had gone northwest, which happened to be in the direction of Chang’an, but there were places further northwest than that, such as Liangzhou. There must have been some tremendous force

pulling the strings behind the black-robed man, but Chen Xing didn't know where that force might be hiding or what they were plotting right now. What did they intend with the revival of a corpse that had turned into bones nearly a hundred years ago?

The Heart Lamp's power had disappeared over three hundred years ago alongside the Silence of All Magic. Was this covert force's scheming the reason it had reemerged now? Chen Xing spent a long time frowning in silence before he looked up again at Xiang Shu, who was now far ahead. Xiang Shu claimed he'd just been meddling in other people's business, but Chen Xing suspected he knew more than he was letting on.

If he did know something, though, wasn't that all the more reason for him to talk to Chen Xing about it? Chen Xing was utterly perplexed.

Fortunately, Xiang Shu didn't bother them as they journeyed northwest, just as Feng Qianjun had predicted. They would stay in inns when they could find them and sleep outdoors when they were traveling through the wilderness.

Tumultuous wars had persisted for years. The lands stretching from the north of Jingjiang to Hanzhong had been plundered over and over, and nine houses out of ten had been deserted long ago. When they couldn't find an inn, the three of them were forced to spend the night in abandoned houses so dilapidated their roofs were long gone. Chen Xing gazed at the vast, starry sky and calculated the number of days with his fingers: he was born in the eighth lunar month, so he had fewer than three years and eight months remaining. He had to find the ruins of the Exorcism Department's headquarters in Chang'an as soon as possible. Then, hopefully, he could uncover the cause of the Silence of All Magic.

Ideally, he would have spent the remaining few years of his life devoting himself completely to restoring mana to the human world—then he could pass it on to the next generation of exorcists so that they could deal with the future emergence of Mara. But unexpectedly, another wave had risen before the preceding wave could pass: a setback in the form of the black-robed man. Chen Xing had no clues to work with, and the more he thought about this issue, the more perplexed he felt. He tossed and turned, unable to sleep, until finally, he got up and went for a walk.

Under the moonlight, he saw Xiang Shu in a small stream behind the abandoned village. He was in long trousers and washing his upper body with cold water. Chen Xing gave him a cursory glance and made his way to the stream. Xiang Shu didn't shun him; he merely remained where he stood.

When Chen Xing rescued him from prison, Xiang Shu had been so emaciated he didn't seem human. Now, not even ten days later, he had already more or less recovered. The moonlight shone on his damp shoulders and back as if plating him with a clear layer of crystalline silver light. "You're much better than you were before," said Chen Xing.

Xiang Shu had fair skin, and his muscles, now that they had recovered, were lean in a way that wasn't exaggerated, revealing contours reminiscent of flowing water. When he stood naked, he didn't seem like a fierce Hu general at all; instead, he possessed a rather refined aura and a perfect scholar's physique. Chen Xing found it baffling.

Along the way, Xiang Shu had occasionally accepted the rations that Chen Xing offered him, but he never accepted food from Feng Qianjun. From time to time, though, when they set up camp to rest, Xiang Shu went hunting. Sometimes he would bring back deer, sometimes wild goats. He ate a lot of meat each meal, which was how his body had recovered so quickly.

The two of them sat face to face, and Xiang Shu finally took the initiative to speak to Chen Xing. "What do you plan to do in Chang'an?"

"Work," replied Chen Xing, seated on the stone beside the stream. "I'm an exorcist. I have my responsibilities."

Xiang Shu walked to the shore, put on an unlined garment, and yanked the tie with both hands to tighten it. The white fabric clung tightly to his body and outlined the contours of his broad back. It was subtle, but the impression he gave was that of a reserved yet threatening presence.

"Just to clarify, you've made up your mind not to be a protector, right?" Chen Xing asked. Xiang Shu raised an eyebrow, so Chen Xing explained things to him. There had always been those who served alongside exorcists as "protectors," guarding them from disturbances while they

exorcised yao. The protector of the Great Exorcist who oversaw headquarters had an impressive title—the Martial God.

Now, there remained only one exorcist in the world: Chen Xing. Naturally, that made Chen Xing the Great Exorcist. As for the Protector Martial God, the Heart Lamp had chosen Xiang Shu to take up that post and Chen Xing himself had no say in the matter.

He wanted to explain about magic and the Divine Land, too, but Xiang Shu said carelessly, “Find someone else. You saved my life and I saved yours, so we’re even.”

Xiang Shu had saved Chen Xing more than once, in fact, most memorably when Chen Xing had acted recklessly in front of the Prince of Chu’s tomb. If Xiang Shu hadn’t reacted quickly, Chen Xing would have been burned to death by the black flames. Well, he might have been; it wasn’t actually certain that those black flames would have killed him. The point was, wasn’t that what a protector was supposed to do?

Chen Xing wasn’t angry at Xiang Shu’s words, though. His time was limited; with only three years and eight months more to live, not many things upset him. He typically just felt a little unhappy at most. Xiang Shu left, and Chen Xing watched his figure recede into the distance.

“Okay,” he said. “I didn’t hold much hope in the first place, and if nothing else, I have to respect your decision. You’ve already rejected me, so let’s go our separate ways after we reach Chang’an.”

Melancholy, Chen Xing sat alone, looking at the stream. There were a lot of things he hadn’t had the chance to tell Xiang Shu about yet, including the relationship between exorcists and their protectors. He also wanted to tell him about that era more than three hundred years ago when exorcists still flourished, when protectors and exorcists went through fire and water together and kept each other company.

Since he left Mount Hua, he’d often imagined the appearance and temperament of his protector and contemplated how he would explain everything to his protector once he met him. In the remaining four years of his life, he’d thought, he would at least have someone by his side. He dared not wish for more, but at least he wouldn’t be lonely.

Sui Xing’s luck, which usually helped him solve all his problems, somehow had no effect on this matter with Xiang Shu. Or perhaps even it was powerless in the face of this challenge with the Heart Lamp and the fate of the Divine Land.

At first, Chen Xing had been brimming with expectations. He’d intended to entrust his remaining four years to Xiang Shu. But his expectations gradually faded into disappointment. He wanted to explain so many things to Xiang Shu, but what was the use? Xiang Shu didn’t care; he was utterly indifferent. He couldn’t be bothered to pay the slightest bit of attention to Chen Xing.

What should I do now? Get a new protector? But will the Heart Lamp replace him for me? This isn’t a matter of feelings; things won’t change simply because I will it. Though he’d hoped to alleviate his worries with a stroll, Chen Xing found his fears amplified instead, so he decided to just return to the house to sleep. Unfortunately, it became even more difficult for him to sleep now, and after a lot of rumination, he was left with only one thought:

It’s all that bastard’s fault.

A few days later, Chen Xing decided that he might as well stop talking to Xiang Shu. Feng Qianjun knew he had gone out for that midnight stroll, so he didn’t ask.

Along the way, they came across populated villages more and more frequently. Birds sang and fragrant flowers bloomed in spring; it was easier for them to find accommodation and places to circulate their silver taels and copper coins now. In this way, the three of them traversed the Wu Pass, Chen Xing ushering his companions through with a signed document from Mai City. They hastened their journey for a few more days and then finally arrived at Chang’an City.

Chang’an had been through more than a hundred years of war. Every time it changed rulers, Chang’an suffered another round of looting and arson. However, ever since the Zhou Period, when it was called Haojing, the ancient city had stood tall in the west of the Divine Land, surrounded by

eight rivers like an enormous tree that nourished the earth. Every time it was set aflame and destroyed, it demonstrated its astonishing tenacity. As far as the eye could see, it was verdant and lush, happy and prosperous, scenic and flourishing. Even with fire beacons alight for days on end, or when fierce battles with the South raged throughout the Wu Pass, Chang'an remained at peace. Its high walls warded off plague, hunger, disaster, and war even as people fleeing from calamity in the Central Plains died from starvation and illness or lived in the wilderness a mere ten miles away.

The city warded off death, too. Like a lively oasis in a barren desert, it had become a world of its own.

The apex of the roof tiles of the palace's gold and jade eaves could be seen next to one another. The magnificent Weiyang Palace was an auspicious omen, yet the palace's master had changed long ago. The Shanglin Garden's abundant flowers bloomed brilliantly with the coming of spring.

The Hu people, with their high nose bridges and deep-set eyes, came and went, riding horses in the streets and spectating cock fights. Han and Hu people mingled, chatting and laughing together. Whether they were Hu or Han, everyone wore stunning attire. The languages of the Di, Xie, Xianbei, and Tiele peoples could be heard all around, and the blue robes of scholars, whose hair crowns were like clouds, were everywhere. The market boasted a dazzling lineup of goods.

The last time Chen Xing was in Chang'an, he'd been only five years old, so most of his memories of this place had long since blurred into obscurity. Seeing these things again produced an indescribable feeling in his heart.

"Hmm. Even though Fu Jian is a Hu Emperor, he managed to govern Chang'an well," Chen Xing said, tone sour.

After nearly half a month of traveling, Chen Xing, Feng Qianjun, and Xiang Shu were travel-worn and looked like a bunch of country bumpkins entering Chang'an. Xiang Shu, who was still dressed in hunter's attire, didn't seem to care much. He scrutinized a group of Hu people on a side

street not far away; it seemed his attention had been roused when he heard the accent of his homeland.

“Yeah,” said Fang Qianjun, “maybe I should let that dog live a while longer.”

They each ordered a bowl of noodles at a noodle stall on the street, an adequate farewell meal for this group of temporary travel companions. After the meal, Chen Xing asked the server about someone while Feng Qianjun went to settle the bill.

“Since we’ve arrived in Chang’an, why don’t…” Feng Qianjun hesitated a little, then looked at Chen Xing. “Why don’t you stay at my dage’s lodgings for a couple of days first?”

Chen Xing knew that Feng Qianjun’s offer was just out of courtesy. Yes, they had taken care of one another on their journey, but they were ultimately still strangers who had met by chance. “I won’t trouble Feng-xiong anymore,” he said quickly. “I have a place to go to. I just got some news confirming that a friend of mine is in Chang’an, and as it happens, I can seek shelter with him. Could you help me raise the puppy for a while, though? It’s not convenient for me to take care of it for now.”

“Sure,” Feng Qianjun replied readily, scooping up the dog. “If you encounter any trouble, just send a letter to the Songbai Residence in the west of the city. From the looks of it, I’ll probably have to stay in Chang’an for some time.” As for Xiang Shu, Feng Qianjun didn’t ask him anything, merely whistled at him and said, “I’ll entrust Tianchi to your care.”

What does it have to do with him? Chen Xing thought.

Feng Qianjun promptly put on his bamboo hat, tucked his hands into his sleeves, and walked into the street, disappearing into the crowd.

Chapter 9

AFTER THEIR MEAL, Chen Xing walked down the bustling street, only to find Xiang Shu still trailing him. “What are you still following me for? Didn’t we agree to let bygones be bygones?”

“So you’re allowed to walk on this street, but I’m not?” Xiang Shu asked coldly.

“Fine. Since you’re heading this way, where are you going?”

They stood in the center of the main street, glaring silently at one another. Then a thought struck Chen Xing: *Maybe this bastard’s following me because he has no money on him.*

On the way over, he had asked for his medicine bag back, and Xiang Shu had returned it to him. While it was true that Xiang Shu hadn’t gotten much gold when he robbed the bank, Chen Xing hadn’t seen him spend any of it. Where did it all go?

“Are you seeking shelter with a friend too?” Chen Xing scrutinized Xiang Shu from head to toe; he was dusty all over. “Clothes make the man, you know. If you go to your friend looking like that, people will look down on you. Ah well, I’ll buy you a set of clothes. Follow me.”

He asked around for recommendations and bought ready-made clothes for them both at a garment shop.

“Do you want to take a bath?” Chen Xing asked.

He deliberated for a bit, then took Xiang Shu to a public bath so they could wash up. Throughout this process, Xiang Shu neither uttered a single word nor paid a single coin. He just stood behind Chen Xing and watched him pull out the money and pay for them. Chen Xing was used to Xiang Shu’s silent treatment by this point, so he soaked in the bathhouse pool and entertained himself by playing with his towel while he rambled.

“I really miss that assassin dage,” he said off-handedly.

Xiang Shu, who had joined him in the pool for a soak, said, “He’s not an assassin.”

“I know, he’s a wandering swordsman. I only called him an assassin offhand. He didn’t seem to have much money on him either…”

“He’s not a swordsman either.”

Feng Qianjun’s departure seemed to have made Xiang Shu more talkative. Chen Xing looked at him quizzically. “Then what is he?”

Somehow, on their way to Chang’an, Chen Xing had gotten the sense that there was some sort of competition going on between Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun, like two martial arts experts warily sizing each other up. Feng Qianjun himself had admitted that there was no way he could beat Xiang Shu, though, so why did his presence bother Xiang Shu so much?

“I don’t know,” Xiang Shu said brusquely. Then he picked up a small, folded knife that he had set down by the pool, tilted his chin down, and used the surface of the water as a mirror to guide himself as he shaved.

“Do you want some help?” Chen Xing asked, worried that Xiang Shu would cut himself. He helped Xiang Shu shave, scraping the knife along the side of his face from his temple to his lower jaw. Xiang Shu had been imprisoned for half a year without seeing the sun, so his skin was very fair, but he was still quite good-looking in spite of it. When he put on his new clothes, he looked like a completely different person, and his beauty could compete with that of the stunning Xianbei men who walked the streets of Chang’an.

It was exactly noon when the two of them left the public bath. Chen Xing glanced at Xiang Shu, who took out the mask that he had seized in Longzhong and casually put it on. It was a thin wooden mask, the likes of which could be found everywhere in the markets of Chang’an City, and it only concealed the upper half of his face, leaving his moist lips and high nose bridge exposed. It really enhanced his dashing and mysterious aura.

What did he do that for? Chen Xing wondered. *Is he worried about being recognized?* Aloud, he said, “Then, are you…?”

He felt choked with bitterness as he studied Xiang Shu. He wanted to say, *This is farewell, then. It's over, you handsome bastard of a protector. Get lost.* But the words wouldn't leave his mouth no matter how hard he tried. And before Chen Xing could finish, Xiang Shu mounted a horse.

"Hey!" Chen Xing protested. "That's my horse!"

The horse Xiang Shu had ridden from Xiangyang to Chang'an belonged to the Great Qin, so obviously he was not allowed to take it into Chang'an with him. At present, Chen Xing's horse was the only horse they had, and if Xiang Shu snatched it away again, he would be left horseless!

However, Xiang Shu didn't spur the horse to leave. He simply stared at Chen Xing from his position astride the horse. "Where are you going?" he asked impatiently. "Get on!"

What, you're actually going to escort me there? Chen Xing thought sarcastically. Based on how things were playing out, Xiang Shu was probably trying to take his horse again… *Let it go, let it go. I'll let him take me to where I need to go. I won't need the horse there, anyway, so there's no harm in letting him take it after that.*

"I'm going to the Yuwen residence on the west side of the city," Chen Xing said grumpily. "After you drop me off there, you can have the horse, I guess."

They rode along, sharing a mount. Finally, Chen Xing couldn't resist asking, "Why are you so rude? It's not like I owe you anything! It's like you don't know how to act civilly."

"Say one more word," Xiang Shu growled, "and I'll throw you off the horse."

Chen Xing had no choice but to shut his mouth and hold onto Xiang Shu's waist from behind as Xiang Shu took him through Chang'an's main street. The situation was a little awkward, and when Chen Xing smelled the faint scent of honey locust soap that wafted from Xiang Shu's body, a multitude of emotions welled up in his heart.

Which of the tribes is this guy from? Chen Xing wondered. Among the five Hu tribes currently in Chang'an—the Di, Jie, Xiongnu, Qiang, and

Xianbei—the Di people were imposing and bold, the Jie people were brave and aggressive, and the Xiongnu people had rough, wild personalities. Only the Qiang people had customs similar to the Han people, and they had been settled in Longxi for many generations.

Of the Five Hu Tribes, the Xianbei people, who traced their ancestry back to the Donghu, were widely accepted as the best-looking. They had smooth, soft, milky skin and dark blue eyes, but they were also very cruel and obstinate. The most renowned of the Xianbei, the person whom Fu Jian was madly in love with, was Murong Chong of the Murong family, one of the four major Xianbei families. And the close friend whom Chen Xing was on his way to visit came from a family that was ranked fourth among the most influential Xianbei families.

“I’m looking for Yuwen Xin,” Chen Xing said to the door as he and Xiang Shu stood in front of the Yuwen family’s large residence.

A small window opened from inside the door. “The master is not at home.” Then it closed with a snap right in Chen Xing’s face.

“He is here!” Chen Xing insisted. “What is the meaning of this?! Open the window!”

Xiang Shu stood silently behind Chen Xing, not responding to any of this. He acted as if nothing had happened.

Chen Xing knocked on the small window again. “I’m one of your master’s old schoolmates, we used to be the best—”

Before he finished talking, the window opened again, and there was a flash of golden light as Xiang Shu seized the opportunity to nonchalantly toss a gold ingot through. They heard a happy squeal from inside, and the side door was unlatched.

“Come, come! Come on in!”

Chen Xing had no words to describe the feelings in his heart. He glanced at Xiang Shu, then headed inside.

After the doorman got his hands on the gold ingot, he led the two of them to a room used for entertaining guests. “My master really did go to the

palace," he said. "Please sit down and have some tea. What message would you like me to deliver?"

"Just inform him that Chen Xing has come to visit."

The Yuwen residence was spacious and lavishly decorated, with bamboo planted all around them. Water gurgled quietly from a hidden alcove, lending the space a touch of archaic elegance, and the mansion was filled with servants.

"Are old Master Yuwen and old Madam Yuwen around?" asked Chen Xing. "I should greet them properly and ask after their health."

"The old master has passed from an illness and the old madam lives in Youzhou now. She rarely visits."

"Has Yuwen Xin gotten married yet?"

"Not yet," the servant replied. "Please take a seat."

Chen Xing chuckled. "He did say that he wanted to marry me back in the day. Sure enough, he hasn't married yet."

Xiang Shu appeared nonplussed. He sat to one side, leaving the Yuwen family's tea untouched. Chen Xing pushed it toward him, but he got no reaction, so he just let Xiang Shu be.

"Do you know the Yuwen family?" Chen Xing asked.

"No," Xiang Shu replied.

So brusque! Chen Xing couldn't resist needling Xiang Shu further. "Has anyone ever told you that you're really boring?"

Xiang Shu glanced at Chen Xing from under his mask. "Everyone says that."

"I think the two of us have to have an honest talk." Even as he voiced that thought, Chen Xing realized that it sounded a bit strange. The Heart Lamp choosing his protector was all one-sided wishful thinking on his part; to Xiang Shu, they were strangers, so why would he be obligated to make small talk with Chen Xing?

Xiang Shu finally picked up the teacup and took a sip of tea, then looked at the cup in his hand.

Chen Xing really wanted to have a chat with Xiang Shu. So far, it seemed, their relationship ran hot at times and cold at others. Xiang Shu hadn't left after they bade farewell to Feng Qianjun, even though they'd said they would part ways, but when it came to getting to know each other, they weren't yet on friendly terms. An idea occurred to Chen Xing: If he were to take the initiative to talk about himself, perhaps he could extract a few words from Xiang Shu.

"Yuwen Xin and I started our schooling together when we were young," he told Xiang Shu. "Do you know what 'schooling' means? It means we were students together. We Han people have to memorize the Thousand Character Text: black sky and yellow earth; the vast and boundless cosmos. You Hu people don't have—"

"I'm a Hu, not a pig," Xiang Shu said severely. "In the eyes of your people, if someone isn't Han, is he then an illiterate idiot who only eats raw meat?"

This caught Chen Xing off guard. "When my father was still alive, many people in Jinyang admired him," he said.

If he thought about it, Chen Xing could also be regarded as the descendant of a prestigious family. His great-great-grandfather was Chen Ping, one of the founding heroes of the Han dynasty. He was known for his six ingenious stratagems, which helped Liu Bang overcome his rivals and unite the realm.[21] For his service, he was given the rank of prime minister. After Lu Zhi's death, Chen Ping also helped quell the Lu Rebellion. Throughout both reigns during the Han dynasty, the Chen family line had abounded with scholars, and Chen Xing's father had been a learned and famous scholar of Jinyang.

Back in the day, Yuwen Xin had been eleven years old, the perfect age to undergo schooling. However, because the beginning of his schooling had been delayed, his father sent Yuwen Xin, his only son, to a private school run by the Chen family. Chen Xing's father believed in the idea of education for everyone, irrespective of their background, and therefore didn't discriminate against the Xianbei people. Chen Xing had been reading and writing essays since he was five years old, so there was no need for him to attend school every day, but he occasionally came to visit his father out

of curiosity. During those visits, Yuwen Xin took a strong liking to Chen Xing, and he would often take Chen Xing's hand and lead him away to play.

Little by little, the two of them grew familiar with each other. Chen Xing took Yuwen Xin home, and when the Chen patriarch saw that his son had a playmate, he grew to like his son's friend and eventually allowed Yuwen Xin to study at the Chen residence as well. Yuwen Xin and Chen Xing spent the best two years of Chen Xing's life together, two years in which both his parents were still around and his grandmother was in good health.

Yuwen Xin loved Chen Xing dearly; whenever his family sent him something, he saved some for Chen Xing. When Yuwen Xin made mistakes in his studies and had to endure scoldings or was forced to kneel outside in the yard, Chen Xing kept him company. The two of them always talked at night, before they went to sleep…

Suddenly, Chen Xing detected that Xiang Shu was getting impatient as he listened. He had an air of irritation about him, like he was ready to pick a quarrel or stir up some trouble.

"Be honest with me," said Chen Xing. "Do you have a grudge against the Yuwen family?" He watched Xiang Shu, but because Xiang Shu was wearing a mask, Chen Xing couldn't see his face clearly. He was afraid that Xiang Shu might do something drastic if he took issue with Yuwen Xin, and it would be a big problem if he killed Yuwen Xin on the spot…

"No," Xiang Shu answered.

Back then, Yuwen Xin had even asked Chen Xing to be his wife. Chen Xing was still young at the time, but he did know quite a lot, and he had burst out laughing. How could a man be a wife? Yuwen Xin was studying the classics, yet he retained within him the wild spirit of the Five Hu tribes. The Hu of the north never had any rules about abiding by the harmony of yin and yang; if they saw a beautiful youngster, they would ask them to be their wife, whether the youngster were a man, a woman, or even a close relative. To have several wives was common as well. Furthermore, it was good to have a male wife, who could assist with physical labor such as

herding livestock and hunting. Marriage was simply a matter of sending a few cattle and sheep to the bride's family and then taking the person home to conduct a ceremony known colloquially as "Qinglü Kowtows." After the ceremony, they would shamelessly make love the second the tent curtains fell, and that would be that.

When Yuwen Xin finished explaining all of that, the six-year-old Chen Xing turned around and sold him out at once. He ran to ask his father if he could get married to Yuwen Xin, thereby earning Yuwen Xin a good beating.

Of course, Chen Xing wouldn't trot out old promises thinking they still held water. But looking back on his childhood friendship with Yuwen Xin, he found it interesting, even now. Chen Xing had spent nine years training with his shifu on Mount Hua after that, and his shifu had been aloof and reserved, with a tendency to speak bluntly. Even before his death, he rarely showed Chen Xing any warmth or affection. On lonely nights, Chen Xing often thought about Yuwen Xin, and those simple, adolescent feelings always managed to make him emotional.

Chen Xing couldn't remember Yuwen Xin's face clearly anymore, but he would always remember how Yuwen Xin would climb into the trees to pick jujubes for him.

Dusk was approaching, and Chen Xing's belly was full of tea. Why wasn't Yuwen Xin back yet? Chen Xing went out and inquired several times, and even after a shift change among the servants who sat idly outside, there still weren't any signs of activity.

"I already said I don't know, all right?" said a servant who hadn't gotten any money from them and was growing impatient with Chen Xing's constant questions. "If you don't want to wait anymore, just leave."

Growing bored, Chen Xing paced back and forth in the room. Xiang Shu continued to sit there lazily; he had even propped one foot up against the tea table. Although he didn't look like a Hu, his posture dripped with the precise sort of coarse arrogance that the Hu people exuded—that "heaven and earth may be great, but I am the greatest" kind of attitude. He was

minding his own business, fiddling with a dagger in his hand. It was the same dagger he had seized from Chen Xing. He'd kept it even after he returned Chen Xing's medicine bag on their journey over.

Chen Xing was deeply irritated. The family hadn't even asked him to stay for dinner; they clearly didn't care about him at all. When he'd visited the Yuwen family as a child, he was always treated with great hospitality.

Suddenly, he heard someone shouting not far away, passing on a message that "the master asked for wine."

"He's back?" Chen Xing murmured to himself.

"He got back a long time ago," Xiang Shu replied, in a rare verbose moment.

"And how do you know that? Did you hear him?" Chen Xing fired back. He left the room and said to the servant, "I want to see your family's master."

"I already said that he's not back yet," the servant drawled.

"I heard someone ask for wine."

Chen Xing was about to walk to the main hall when the servant yelled, "Hey! Stop right there! How dare you act so arrogantly here!" The servant approached, intending to drag him back, but Xiang Shu pinched the back of his neck with two fingers. The servant's eyes instantly glazed over as he fainted.

Chen Xing was about to head for the main hall when the housekeeper, who had heard the commotion, blocked his path. "Young Master Chen, the master of the house has not yet returned. Why don't you wait a little longer? Or you could leave and come back again tomorrow."

Chen Xing stopped. "He must be back, I heard everything. Go and tell him that Chen Xing's here. Go and tell him right now."

Xiang Shu had been following behind Chen Xing this entire time. The housekeeper looked up at him. He wasn't afraid of Chen Xing, but this masked man was of unknown origin and didn't seem like someone easy to deal with, so the housekeeper didn't dare to pick a fight with him. Instead,

he smiled patiently at Chen Xing. “He really isn’t back yet. You must have misheard.”

Chen Xing pushed him aside, shouting, “Xin-ge!”

In the garden, at the end of a corridor, two men had turned around and were about to leave.

Chen Xing shouted, “Yuwen Xin!” and chased after them. Xiang Shu pushed the housekeeper aside. Chen Xing reached the front courtyard and bellowed, “Yuwen Xin!”

He saw two young men in the hall. One was standing, the other sitting, and both were in their twenties. The man who was standing wore an azure scholar’s robe; he had a slender body, a handsome face, and a clear countenance. The seated one was dressed in an ochre martial robe embroidered with a scene of Zhuyin, the Torch Dragon, traversing Night and Day. They both looked to be Xianbei, and the one who was on his feet was handing a cup of tea to the man who was sitting down. When they heard Chen Xing’s shout, they both turned to face him at the same time.

For several moments, everyone was silent. The military official’s grip loosened, and the teacup fell to the ground, shattering into pieces with a clang that startled Chen Xing.

Chen Xing looked up, his gaze sweeping across both faces. The face of the young man in the scholar’s robe looked vaguely familiar to him, and Chen Xing smiled. “Xin-ge!”

Yuwen Xin finally snapped out of his trance and smiled back. “You’re Chen Xing!”

The housekeeper finally caught up. Yuwen Xin threw him a reproachful glance, but that minute detail flew over Chen Xing’s head as he walked forward to pat his old friend. Yuwen Xin quickly made a subtle gesture to stop him, then changed the motion so that he was shaking hands with Chen Xing and patting his arm. Chen Xing paid no attention to that; smiling, he sat down, then motioned for Xiang Shu to come in as well.

“You’re still alive!” Yuwen Xin exclaimed.

“Ah, that’s right.” Chen Xing remembered now: When they parted, Yuwen Xin’s entire family had moved to Chang’an, while Chen Xing’s own family had been destroyed in the conflagration of war. Over the past few years, he had sent several letters to Yuwen Xin but received no reply. They were likely lost in transit, and Yuwen Xin must have thought that Chen Xing was dead. “You said that your family was in Chang’an, and I happened to be in the area, so I came to visit because I missed you.”

Saying these words, Chen Xing suddenly sensed a distance between himself and Yuwen Xin, but Yuwen Xin just kept nodding. “That’s great,” he said. “I knew that you had to be alive.”

“Did you not receive my letters?”

Yuwen Xin looked puzzled. Noticing that the young military officer had been looking at him the entire time, Chen Xing smiled politely at him. Yuwen Xin snapped out of his stupor and quickly introduced them. “This is Regular Mounted Attendant Tuoba Yan, Lord Tuoba. Tuoba-xiong, Chen Xing and I were classmates for two years. He’s my xiaoshidi.”

The young man named Tuoba Yan didn’t say anything. He merely nodded and looked at Chen Xing with a hint of a smile in his eyes.

“Tuoba-xiong is a true talent, and quite handsome to boot,” Chen Xing said cheerfully. The post of Regular Mounted Attendant meant that this man was the commander of the imperial guard. Although he wasn’t too high in rank, he held a great deal of influence. Chen Xing hadn’t thought that Fu Jian would appoint such a young man to the post.

He wasn’t just trying to butter Tuoba Yan up, either. As Chen Xing entered the hall, he’d noticed that Yuwen Xin had grown up a lot in the past nine years; he looked very different from before. By contrast, this young military officer’s fetching appearance was unparalleled, and he looked elegant as well. His back was ramrod straight, and when he sat upright, he looked even more self-disciplined, which made Chen Xing feel at ease.

Chen Xing’s words made Tuoba Yan blush in delight, though. Neither Chen Xing nor Yuwen Xin knew quite what to say. The situation was so awkward that in the end, Chen Xing had no choice but to laugh loudly. “It’s true! Tuoba-xiong, why is your face red? Are you—”

“Who’s this?” Yuwen Xin asked, quickly changing the subject.

“Oh, his name is Xiang Shu. He’s my…um…friend.”

Chen Xing wanted to say “protector,” but that would have been asking for a slap in the face. Yuwen Xin offered Xiang Shu some pleasantries, but Xiang Shu didn’t pay him any attention at all. *You’re the one who wanted to follow me, and you’re gonna be like that when you meet my friend? At least greet him!*

Fury boiled in Chen Xing’s stomach. He was so angry he felt like he had the guts to do anything. He smiled at Yuwen Xin and explained, “He’s mute.”

“Oh, I understand!” Yuwen Xin nodded.

Chen Xing was waiting for Xiang Shu to retort so that he could exclaim, “Oh, so you can speak!”

But Xiang Shu didn’t say anything. He remained silent as ever.

Chapter 10

TUOBA YAN'S ATTENTION had only been briefly diverted by Xiang Shu before it returned to Chen Xing's face. He was beaming, apparently deep in thought, with a slight blush of embarrassment on his cheeks.

"Um…is Tuoba-xiong also…" Chen Xing looked at Tuoba Yan. *Oh no, don't tell me he's genuinely mute? Did he think I was badmouthing him?*

"No, no!" Yuwen Xin interjected quickly. "He's not! He's usually not like this… Tuoba-xiong?"

Tuoba Yan coughed and took a deep breath. He looked like he wanted to say something, so everyone waited expectantly, but instead, he fell silent again. Chen Xing didn't know what to say.

Damn it! This is so embarrassing! What's the matter with this person?

Finally, Tuoba Yan spoke. "I…will go for a walk." Then he stood abruptly and left without saying another word.

Chen Xing was mystified, and Yuwen Xin seemed to find Tuoba Yan's behavior bizarre as well. He watched Tuoba Yan leave, pondered for a moment, and then asked, "Why did you come to Chang'an?"

"Well, it really fits the saying 'Life is too short, and it's a long story to tell.' Ever since we parted ways—"

But just as he began to speak, Tuoba Yan returned and sat down again, leaving Chen Xing freshly bewildered. Chen Xing decided to put his story on hold for the time being. With an outsider present, he didn't want to delve too deeply into exorcist matters. The unexpected events on Longzhong Mountain had made him cautious; if there were such strange forces at work, it might be safer, for the moment, to keep his identity close to his chest. After all, exorcists and yao tribes had always been at odds.

"Never mind." Chen Xing smiled. "We can always discuss it in detail next time. I have so much I want to share with you."

Yuwen Xin nodded and made an approving sound. “That’s true. Where are you staying in the city?”

Hearing this, Chen Xing felt a twinge of disappointment. He had hoped Yuwen Xin would say, *You can stay here for now,* and then, after he’d finished with his guest, come find Chen Xing for a late-night chat. There was no need to overthink it, though, so he replied, “I arrived in Chang’an this morning and came straight to find you.”

“You just arrived?!” Tuoba Yan exclaimed suddenly.

Chen Xing laughed awkwardly. “Yep.”

Tuoba Yan shot Yuwen Xin an inscrutable look. Yuwen Xin appeared slightly puzzled. After a moment’s thought, he said, “Then you…hmm. The Songbai Residence to the west of the city is not bad. I won’t keep you for dinner, in that case. You should rest well.”

Chen Xing fell silent. It was clear that Tuoba Yan wanted to say something, but he restrained himself, casting a doubtful glance at Xiang Shu as if suddenly remembering that he was still present in the hall.

“Oh,” Chen Xing said finally. “Okay, I won’t hold you up any longer, then.”

With that, Yuwen Xin instructed his housekeeper to escort his guests out. He hadn’t even offered Chen Xing tea. Chen Xing finally understood—he had clearly misjudged their relationship.

Chen Xing had just stepped out of the hall when he suddenly turned around. Tuoba Yan was watching Chen Xing leave, and Yuwen Xin appeared lost in thought. “Xin-ge,” Chen Xing said.

A smile returned to Yuwen Xin’s face. “What is it?” he inquired politely.

“Nothing.” Chen Xing smiled with relief. “I hope to see you again.”

Yuwen Xin raised his hand slightly in a gesture of farewell, not rising from his seat.

After they left the Yuwen residence, Chen Xing walked slowly out of the alley under the cover of the fallen darkness and a sky full of stars. Xiang Shu followed him silently.

Chen Xing suddenly remarked, “You saw me make a fool of myself.” Xiang Shu glanced at the distant Yuwen residence without answering. “Do you have any money? I’ve spent all of mine.”

“No.” The gold ingot Xiang Shu had thrown into the Yuwen residence was his last.

Chen Xing stood by the roadside, sighing sadly. His shifu had taught him little about the ways of the world. Most of the time, he had simply instructed Chen Xing to read books, claiming that books contained all knowledge. But for all the books he had read, Chen Xing couldn’t fathom why Yuwen Xin had changed so much in nine years.

The subject that interested him the least was learning how to read people. Reflecting on Yuwen Xin’s current appearance, he realized that Yuwen Xin was quite different from nine years ago, seemingly much more worldly.

Xiang Shu asked, “Where are you going? An inn?”

“How are we going to stay at an inn without any money? Just wait here.” Should he go and find Feng Qianjun? But Feng Qianjun probably didn’t have much money either.

“Wait?”

“Wait for the heavens to give me money. Just wait for a bit. It’ll happen any minute now.”

Xiang Shu looked at Chen Xing skeptically.

“I’ve told you before that Sui Xing is part of my fate,” said Chen Xing. “I’m very lucky; I have never lacked money. Just watch.”

In less than the time it would take to finish a cup of tea, an official’s carriage approached from the long street, its lantern leading the way. The driver, a handsome young man clad in bright, solid-colored steel armor, rode a large horse. The carriage abruptly halted in front of them.

“See!” Chen Xing crowed. Xiang Shu stared in silence, his expression unreadable.

Several guards dismounted one by one. They drew the carriage curtain aside and said, “Chen-gongzi, our master wishes to speak with you inside the carriage.”

“Who’s your master?” Chen Xing thought, *This person seems rich… Wait, no, why address me as Chen-gongzi?*

He moved to board the carriage, but Xiang Shu restrained him with a firm hand on his shoulder. “Come down if you want to talk,” he said.

The person inside the carriage acquiesced, stepping out in just a few swift strides. It was Tuoba Yan!

“Chen Xing?” Tuoba Yan smiled. “Why are you here?”

Chen Xing hadn’t expected to see him at all. It hadn’t been long at all since he left the Yuwen residence, so how could he bump into Tuoba Yan here? He smiled back. “You didn’t stay at the Yuwen residence for dinner?”

“Nope. Mm, nope, I didn’t. Move!” His guards had moved closer with torches to provide some illumination, and Tuoba Yan carelessly pushed them aside. Chen Xing didn’t understand what was going on. “You’ve just arrived in Chang’an and aren’t familiar with the place and people here. Why not…come stay at my residence for a few nights? My humble abode is a little crude, but it has been cleaned up to welcome guests. I already sent word back home to make preparations.”

Chen Xing was delighted. He was about to say, *Sure!* when Xiang Shu interjected.

“No.”

Chen Xing paused, unsure what to do.

What does this have to do with you?! he thought. *What does any of this have to do with you?!*

Chen Xing looked back at Xiang Shu, but Xiang Shu’s hands remained firmly on his shoulders; he couldn’t budge an inch. Tuoba Yan

glanced at Xiang Shu with a slight frown, and Chen Xing sensed a shift in the atmosphere. Things were becoming tense.

“Let’s go,” Xiang Shu said.

“Wait!” Tuoba Yan and Chen Xing exclaimed in unison. Tuoba Yan suddenly remembered: Wasn’t this man a mute? He didn’t question it further, however.

If it hadn’t been for Xiang Shu, Chen Xing would have followed Tuoba Yan immediately, but he hesitated to refute Xiang Shu outright. Xiang Shu was penniless right now. If Chen Xing left with Tuoba Yan, it would be a small matter for Xiang Shu to sleep under a bridge, but a huge problem if he resorted to robbing a bank—especially in Chang’an, directly under the emperor’s nose!

“If this…mute brother is amenable,” Tuoba Yan had forgotten Xiang Shu’s name, “I’d like to invite both of you to stay at my residence. Please give this younger brother a chance to host you.”

Judging by how Yuwen Xin treated him, Tuoba Yan couldn’t be of low rank, but he was incredibly self-effacing. It really surprised Chen Xing. As he opened his mouth to ask Xiang Shu for his consent, Xiang Shu said firmly, “No. How many times do I have to repeat myself?”

Chen Xing sensed a fleeting murderous intent, and Tuoba Yan seemed to perceive it as well. But the hostility vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

“We…will just find an inn for now,” Chen Xing said, afraid that Xiang Shu, the rabid dog, would stab Tuoba Yan over a slight disagreement. “So…we’ll take our leave.”

Understanding that Xiang Shu was a difficult person to deal with, Tuoba Yan nodded at Chen Xing. “Then let’s catch up again when you have the time!” Without waiting for a response, he removed a ring from his finger and placed it in Chen Xing’s hand. “When you’ve found a place to stay, send word to me. In the larger area on the west side of the imperial city, there’s a vermillion residence in the center with eaves inlaid with gold. The one with a door inset with jade is my humble abode.”

“This is our first meeting, how can I accept this?” Chen Xing asked, though he wanted to say, *You could have just lent me some silver; why give me your own ring?*

Tuoba Yan turned around and boarded his carriage, and his guards quickly returned to their positions and began to drive away. Chen Xing was left momentarily speechless, holding Tuoba Yan’s ring in his hand. When he looked up, he saw a smiling Tuoba Yan draw aside the carriage’s curtain and make a gesture with two fingers: *This is the second meeting!*

Chen Xing was stunned into silence.

There they stood by the roadside again. Chen Xing examined the ring in his hand. Crafted from polished, ancient stone, it was simple and unembellished, yet it emitted a faint glow in the dark night. A divine dragon was carved into the stone, its head and tail seamlessly connected, intricately detailed with craftsmanship so exquisite it rivaled nature itself. Moreover, it was a ring made of luminous stone!

Since he was a child, Chen Xing had encountered numerous precious items. Even compared to the collections at his home and his master’s house, a treasure of this caliber was nothing to sneeze at. Tuoba Yan had casually removed a ring worth at least three thousand taels of gold and gifted it to him—it was truly extravagant.

“This couldn’t be some kind of magical artifact, could it?” Chen Xing said, doubts beginning to set in. After the Silence of All Magic, all magical artifacts except for the Heart Lamp had turned into ordinary weapons. What if this was one such artifact? “Can it be pawned?”

He suspected not. What was Tuoba Yan’s status? Commander of Fu Jian’s personal army. If Chen Xing took the ring to a pawn shop, chances were, it would be recognized immediately and reported to the authorities.

“Now what?” Xiang Shu finally asked.

“Wait for a bit longer, I guess?” Chen Xing despaired a little. “Until the next batch of money.”

But no one else arrived. How strange—this wasn’t right, Chen Xing thought. Normally, he didn’t have to wait this long for a stroke of luck.

A quarter of an hour later, Chen Xing said, “Has Sui Xing closed shop for the day? Why don’t we just seek shelter with Feng-dage?”

Xiang Shu turned around and left without another word.

“Where are you going?” Chen Xing called after him, but Xiang Shu didn’t respond. He led the way while Chen Xing trailed after him. Chen Xing, unfamiliar with the area, noticed it growing increasingly deserted the farther they walked. Were they searching for a place to spend the night? It didn’t seem likely; this street was heavily patrolled.

Eventually, Xiang Shu arrived at the base of a tall wall. Not far ahead loomed a massive gate painted in red lacquer, and Xiang Shu walked directly toward it.

“What are you doing?” Chen Xing asked.

“Finding a place to spend the night,” replied Xiang Shu.

There were two guards at the red lacquer gate. When they saw Xiang Shu approaching, they said, “This area is forbidden! No one is allowed—”

Holding his steel sword, Xiang Shu swiftly executed two moves with the blade still sheathed. The guards abruptly fell silent, then collapsed to the ground. Chen Xing was astonished. “Don’t attack soldiers! It’s not like they provoked you!”

Xiang Shu kicked the massive wooden door so hard that the lower hinge broke, making it swing open. Sword in hand, he strode through the doorway. Chen Xing rushed after him, shouting, “Aahhh! Do you even know what you’re doing?!”

Xiang Shu was obviously too lazy to explain. He walked in, eliciting immediate alarm among the surrounding soldiers. “Who goes there?” they shouted. “There’s an assassin!”

Someone was playing a zither in the distance, presumably the master of this place. The zither’s music was natural and serene, like the sound of tinkling melodies made by different-sized pearls as they gently fell onto a jade plate.

A large group of armed soldiers rushed over. On his sword’s hilt, Xiang Shu’s fingers followed the rhythm of the zither, tapping lightly three

times.

Begin.

All Chen Xing saw was a shadow flashing past him; Xiang Shu swept by swiftly, and all the soldiers collapsed to the ground like paper dolls in a shadow play. Without missing a beat, Xiang Shu advanced, passing slowly by the mess of guards sprawled on the ground and groaning in pain. Though they had all had been incapacitated by the sheathed sword, none were fatally wounded. Chen Xing panicked, eager to pull Xiang Shu away, but the zither's music paused. Xiang Shu proceeded confidently into the corridor behind the garden, making his way toward the grand residence as if he were familiar with the place.

As they got closer to the sound of the zither, guards began pouring out endlessly from all directions. As soon as a guard appeared, Xiang Shu would knock him down. Jab, stab, sweep, graze; Xiang Shu never stopped walking, and wherever he went, guards fell. The zither's sound grew louder. Though Xiang Shu's sword remained sheathed, it seemed as if he had torn apart the curtain that dimmed every other lamp—none could rival his light.

The zither stopped.

"Keep up," Xiang Shu instructed.

"Wait…" Chen Xing hurried after Xiang Shu. He reached out to pull him back, but Xiang Shu turned and entered a magnificent residence. The interior was bedecked with jewels so brilliant that Chen Xing was almost blinded. Inside, two beautiful women were playing the zither, and when they saw Xiang Shu, they shrieked and abruptly stopping playing. Ignoring them, Xiang Shu pushed open a side door and walked through it.

"Where are we?" Chen Xing wondered aloud. "Please excuse us, w-we accidentally trespassed into a treasure trove… We'll leave right now!"

Xiang Shu passed through five or six rooms in succession, and in each room, people screamed and panicked. Some ran away in a frenzy, and others pleaded for mercy. Chen Xing finally realized a problem:

This was the palace.

His soul leaped out of his body. He shouted, “Xiang Shu! Stop walking! This is the palace! We have to escape!”

Chen Xing chased after Xiang Shu and found himself in front of a vast drill ground. Sure enough, this was Weiyang Palace, and he and Xiang Shu had just barged in from the imperial garden. They had passed through the rooms of the imperial concubines and now stood at the entrance of Dengming Hall.

The imperial palace was in utter chaos. Imperial guards poured out onto the drill ground outside Dengming Hall, trapping Xiang Shu and Chen Xing in the middle.

Tuoba Yan had just returned home and hadn’t even had time to change his clothes before he heard of assassins in the palace. He made haste for the palace on horseback equipped with a long dagger-axe, and as he rushed onto the drill ground, he was met with the bright illumination of torches that turned night into day. Some twenty thousand crossbows were pointed at the two assassins in the center of the drill ground.

“Assassins! Who sent you?” Tuoba Yan exclaimed. “Wait, it’s you two?! Stop, don’t shoot! Don’t kill them!” he shouted, making himself conspicuous in the crowd.

Chen Xing scanned his surroundings: Guards were stationed around the drill ground, on rooftops, and on the steps leading to the imperial court. With just one order from Tuoba Yan, they would be riddled with arrows.

“Tuoba-xiong!” Chen Xing exclaimed urgently. “This has nothing to do with me! He’s holding me hostage…”

Xiang Shu interrupted Chen Xing, calling out toward Dengming Hall, “Jiantou! Get out here! We need to talk!”

There was a sudden uproar among the twenty thousand guards. That form of address had not been heard in Chang’an for a long time.

A loud chuckle resounded from within Dengming Hall. “Shulü Kong?! Where on earth have you been hiding for the past year?”

The Qin army gathered around a burly fellow in a cloth robe. This robust, bearded man descended the steps, nonchalantly lowering the iron

crossbow of an imperial guard. The sound of crossbows being lowered echoed around them. Moments later, several military officials hurried out, astonishment plain on their faces. They glanced at the robust man, then at Xiang Shu.

“Your Majesty!” shouted Tuoba Yan.

“Fu Jian?” Chen Xing was already dumbstruck.

Xiang Shu took off his mask and threw it aside. All the civil and military officials cried out in alarm: “Great Chanyu?!”

That title was like a clap of thunder exploding next to Chen Xing’s ears.

“Great…great what?” Chen Xing was at an utter loss. “Xiang Shu, they called you great what?”

Chapter 11

A SUDDEN CLAP OF THUNDER struck the ground.

Great! Chan! Yu!

Searching his memory for this title, Chen Xing finally recalled some things he had largely forgotten from the time he spent living in Jinyang nine years ago. His father had once mentioned that the title of “Great Chanyu” originated from the Xiongnu people to identify the monarch of the Hu tribes. However, after Liu Yuan led the Xiongnu people through the pass and founded the Han-Zhao Dynasty, the Great Chanyu became an empty title used to beguile the Hu people beyond the Great Wall—it held no real authority.

Over several decades, Han-Zhao collapsed, the Xiongnu’s imperial Liu clan was decimated, and the Han’s Ran Min established the State of Wei, conferring the title of Great Chanyu on his son, who was to govern all the Hu. After the fall of Ran-Wei, the Hu in the North could no longer tolerate their own people attacking one another after entering the pass; they smeared blood on their lips and took an oath under Chi Le Chuan to reestablish the covenant, terming it the “Ancient Chi Le Covenant,” and elected a Great Chanyu—the Tiele’s Shulü family.

Since then, the Great Chanyu had been the nominal chieftain of the Hu tribes and natural commander of all five Hu tribes within the pass. The tribes of the Central Plains’ imperial court took turns performing on stage and sitting on the emperor’s throne, yet they couldn’t ignore the Great Chanyu’s influence within and beyond the Great Wall.

Aside from the Di, Jie, Qiang, Xianbei, and Xiongnu, there were many nomadic peoples beyond the Great Wall, and those tribes still treated the chieftain as their leader and would obey his orders. However, the tribes were unable to work together. After all, they had always been divided on how they lived their lives, the places in which they dwelt, and their interests, and there was often a significant amount of internal strife within the tribes as well. The position of Great Chanyu in the Ancient Chi Le

Covenant was thus established to mediate or even suppress the disputes both within and between tribes. Moreover, although the Five Hu had entered the pass and lived there now, their ancestors' bloodlines and roots still lay beyond the Great Wall.

Entering the pass had resulted in endless disputes among the tribes, but it was only right and proper for everything old to be replaced with the new. The elders were unable to stop their tribes from abandoning their homes and migrating en masse into the pass, yet they were unwilling to relinquish the power they held, so they elected a Great Chanyu with the intention of controlling the Central Plains.

Whether it was Han-Zhao, Ran-Wei, the current Qin Dynasty, or even the Yan State under the Murong clan that had been wiped out by Fu Jian's army, if one wanted to establish a country and be called an emperor, there was a ritual one had to observe: The Great Chanyu, the nominal leader of the Hu, had to come forth from north of the Great Wall and confer on the soon-to-be emperor a scroll marked with the blood of the various tribes. A gold ribbon would bind the parchment as an expression of the loyalty and allegiance of all the tribes both within and beyond the Great Wall.

This process was known as the Purple Scroll of Golden Conferment because blood smeared on sheepskin appeared light purple in color. It could not be neglected, no matter how stable a foreign emperor's rule was after entering the pass. It was also for this reason that the emperor seldom held a concurrent post as the Great Chanyu. No ruler would want to confer the Purple Scroll upon himself, after all; they would become the laughingstock of the Five Hu.

During the Ran-Wei Dynasty, the Great Chanyu had been an empty title, but it was not necessarily so for Fu Jian. The Fu family, which had been serving as the head of the Xirong tribe for generations, had received tremendous assistance in conquering the area within the pass from the previous Great Chanyu, Shulü Song. Not only did the Hu Coalition Army control the enemy for the Fu family, they had also turned into a powerful chess piece in Fu Hong's hands.

Obtaining the tacit consent of the Great Chanyu was what had enabled the Fu family, which had also briefly pledged allegiance to the Jin

Dynasty, to gain such a firm footing. The current emperor's uncle, also called Fu Jian,[22] had established the Qin State and was succeeded by his son Fu Sheng after his death while Fu Sheng's younger cousin Fu Jian was appointed the Prince of Donghai. But Fu Sheng was licentious and despotic and had acted perversely, resulting in a civil war that erupted within the Great Qin. It was the Great Chanyu, Shulü Wen, who had united the tribes to help Fu Jian take control of Fu Sheng's army.

In the end, aside from the contribution of his own talents, this had been the most crucial factor in Fu Jian securing half of the country in the North: the help he received from the Shulü family from beyond the Great Wall.

Chen Xing had never expected the protector he inadvertently saved from Xiangyang City to actually be the heir of that same Shulü family!

Fu Jian burst out laughing and draped an arm around Xiang Shu's shoulders, welcoming him into Dengming Hall. Xiang Shu seemed accustomed to it. He pointed offhand, motioning for Chen Xing to sit.

"Serve some food," he said. "It's late and I haven't even had lunch yet. I'm hungry."

Fu Jian immediately dismissed the palace officials and asked someone to deliver a meal. Tuoba Yan looked at Chen Xing, utterly lost. Surprised, Chen Xing gently waved his hand to signal that he had no clue about any of this, either.

Dengming Hall was where Fu Jian read and amended memorials to the throne. In governing the North, the Emperor of Qin shouldered immense responsibility. Few people understood his efforts, but he was doing his utmost, and for the most part, he ate his three meals in the palace. Murong Chong, designated the Prefect of Pingyang, had gone to take up his office. Ever since Murong Chong left his side, Fu Jian rarely went to see the concubines of his imperial harem; he spent most of his time diligently handling political affairs.

"You disappeared from the face of the earth just like that, and you were gone for a whole year," Fu Jian said. "I've sent word out to search

everywhere for you!”

Soon, wine was served. Xiang Shu drank a little and said, “Well, life is too short, and it’s a long story.”

You plagiarized me! You actually plagiarized me word for word! Chen Xing thought.

Fu Jian made a gesture to dismiss Tuoba Yan, indicating that there was no need for him to stand on guard any longer. Only the three of them and a eunuch who could be ordered around remained.

“And who is this young man?” Fu Jian looked at Chen Xing, his interest piqued. “You haven’t introduced him yet.”

“A kid I picked up from the streets,” Xiang Shu said. “I thought he looked beautiful, so I brought him to you as a catamite. But he’s a mute, unfortunately.”

Chen Xing immediately turned to Xiang Shu. “You—”

“You’re not mute?” Xiang Shu interrupted deftly.

Fu Jian burst out laughing again. “Xiang Shu!” Chen Xing protested. “Why didn’t you tell me you’re the Great Chanyu?”

“How is my identity any of your business?” Xiang Shu asked coldly. “In any case, I’m not a protector.”

Fu Jian smiled at Chen Xing. “How exactly did the two of you get to know each other?” he asked. “And what other nonsense did Shulü Kong spout? This fellow must have slandered Us quite a bit in front of you.”

Chen Xing had totally accepted everything by this point. *Hold on, this person is Fu Jian? I’m talking to the Emperor of Qin, Fu Jian, right now?!* Too many things had happened in one night, and he was so confused that for a moment, he didn’t know what to ask.

Just then, another beautiful woman came in with several palace maids. When she saw Xiang Shu, she said lightly, “The palace was in such pandemonium just now. Someone even said there was an assassin and asked me to lay low. I said that there was no need, and it was most likely the Great Chanyu. Sure enough, I was right.”

Chen Xing hadn’t exactly met a great many girls before, but this was practically the most beautiful girl he had ever seen in his life. She was dressed in a plain robe and wore no rouge or powder, but she was still clearly of the Xianbei race—her skin was as fair as jade, her eyebrows so perfect that they looked as if they had been drawn on, and she seemed slightly cold and amorous.

“Princess Qinghe.” When Fu Jian saw Chen Xing studying her, he smiled. “Have you heard of her?”

Chen Xing nodded promptly out of courtesy, his eyes filled with admiration. Fu Jian took this as a sign that Chen Xing was lauding the beauty of his favorite concubine. He was a broad-minded person, and he was delighted to know something he loved was receiving a commendation.

Princess Qinghe led the palace maids in to serve their food before personally pouring wine for Xiang Shu, Chen Xing, and Fu Jian. Immediately thereafter, she led her retinue out, leaving the three of them to talk among themselves. Outside, Chen Xing saw Princess Qinghe whisper some instructions to Tuoba Yan, who bowed and left. Then the door to the palace hall was closed, and Xiang Shu finally motioned for Chen Xing to eat before turning to speak to Fu Jian.

“A year ago,” he said, “I was investigating a matter and headed south from beyond the Great Wall all the way across the Yellow River…”

Chen Xing knew that Xiang Shu was giving an account of his disappearance to Fu Jian, and that he was finally willing to give Chen Xing an explanation as well. He paused for a moment and decided not to ask any more questions. In any case, he was hungry, so he could think about it again after he’d eaten.

Fu Jian scrutinized Chen Xing. How curious must he have been about Xiang Shu and Chen Xing’s relationship? But he turned his attention back to Xiang Shu before long. “Oh?” he said. “Something must have happened after your father died of illness.”

“Yes.” Xiang Shu raised his glass and drank with Fu Jian. “It happened in the first year after I took over the post of Great Chanyu.”

Fu Jian frowned deeply. For Xiang Shu to suddenly charge into Weiyang Palace like this, there must have been something significant he wanted to warn him about.

In recent years, the Hu peoples beyond the Great Wall had been crossing through the pass one after another, and the Great Chanyu's influence was not as strong as before. Only a few tribes that felt attached to their homelands still roved beyond the Great Wall. In total, the number of adult men came out to roughly one hundred thousand, making it a sizable group but not a massive one.

Xiang Shu had taken over the post of Great Chanyu from his father at the age of sixteen, then vanished without a trace the following year. Fortunately, the various tribes beyond the Great Wall were accustomed to the Great Chanyu's free and unfettered lifestyle, so his disappearing for a few years did not cause any serious issues. Fu Jian, however, having yet to be granted the Purple Scroll of Golden Conferment by Xiang Shu, was anxious to determine his whereabouts.

"The Valennu tribe was exterminated overnight on the south bank of the Liaohe River," Xiang Shu said.

Fu Jian recalled the event. "A small tribe. Descendants of the Eastern people." The Valennu tribe was one of the branches of the Xianbei people, collectively known by the Han as the Eastern Hu. Fu Jian typically wanted to avoid such taboos, but this kind of tribe wasn't that important to him.

Xiang Shu pressed on. "The cause of death was extraordinary: They had all turned into living corpses."

Chen Xing paused again, then looked up and stared at Xiang Shu in disbelief.

"Oh?" Fu Jian sounded bewildered. "Living corpses?"

"The Han call them 'drought fiends.' Legend has it that once drought fiends appear on earth, severe droughts will last for years."

This was what Xiang Shu had overheard from Chen Xing's conversations with Feng Qianjun on their way to Chang'an. Chen Xing continued eating his dinner, but a multitude of thoughts ran through his

mind. Everything was beginning to tie together—Xiang Shu's words were finally answering the questions he had along the way!

"Oh…" Fu Jian seemed skeptical. It seemed he still didn't understand what Xiang Shu was trying to say.

Without waiting for Fu Jian's response, Xiang Shu continued, "The murderer fled south. When I chased him, I somehow fell victim to his sorcery and lost all the strength in my body. The Jin army happened to find me then, and they trapped me in the pass, then took me to Xiangyang, where I was imprisoned. After that, due to a strange combination of circumstances, I was able to escape from prison when the city fell."

Chen Xing had no words. Xiang Shu's tracks were gradually becoming clear in his mind. That mysterious, black-robed man's accomplice had already appeared as early as a year ago?! What were the forces behind him plotting? Thousands of people from the tribe were turned into living corpses, and Xiang Shu had set out southward to pursue the matter. In the end, he was taken prisoner in the South and escorted to Xiangyang… No wonder he went to investigate the living corpses alone when they had passed through Longzhong Mountain.

But Xiang Shu was concealing some things; he must not have thought it necessary to reveal everything to Fu Jian. Chen Xing began planning. He would have to discuss this in detail with Xiang Shu later.

"When I passed by Longzhong Mountain on my way to the north," Xiang Shu continued, "I found new—"

"Thank goodness you made it out." Fu Jian smiled. "Otherwise, I really wouldn't know how to account for your absence to the Ancient Chi Le Covenant."

"My imprisonment is secondary. I really can't figure out the oddity in this—"

"Never mind." Fu Jian waved his hand to indicate that there was no need for him to continue. "Let's not talk about this today. We can discuss this small matter another time. All is well now that you're back."

Xiang Shu narrowed his eyes slightly but didn’t answer. Chen Xing felt the sudden flare of Xiang Shu’s anger keenly, but after being interrupted twice by Fu Jian, Xiang Shu didn’t continue.

Both men fell silent for a moment, as if they were each thinking about something else. Then Fu Jian smiled again. “Stay in Chang’an for now. Don’t leave.” Xiang Shu didn’t respond, but Fu Jian continued, “When summer comes, I’ll set up an office for you after I offer a sacrifice to the heavens. There are still many things to discuss—all in good time.”

Xiang Shu was still thinking, and the look on his face was complicated. Finishing his meal, Chen Xing looked at him. Xiang Shu caught a glimpse of him from the corner of his eye and called out in a loud voice, “Servants!” People came in from outside the hall, and Xiang Shu motioned for them to take Chen Xing away to rest. To Fu Jian, he said, “If you have something to say, say it here.”

Chen Xing hesitated, smoothing out his clothes. “Then,” he began, “I…” But seeing the palace maids make a beseeching gesture, he left Dengming Hall. A group of eunuchs was waiting for him, and they bowed; given that he was the Great Chanyu’s companion, they dared not slight him, and they started to lead him to the sleeping chambers to rest.

But they had taken no more than three steps when a loud noise came from the palace hall behind them. Chen Xing, shocked, was about to look back when a different group of eunuchs rushed over and peered through the cracks of the door. Fu Jian’s angry rebukes could occasionally be heard. Chen Xing wanted to peep in on them as well, but the eunuchs quickly waved their hands to indicate that nothing was wrong and sent him off to the sleeping chambers to rest.

These were the most comfortable sleeping arrangements that had been afforded to Chen Xing since he left Mount Hua. There were heating tunnels below Fu Jian’s palace that made the whole room warm. Incense suffused the bed, smoke curling upward from the burner, and the entire chamber was well-lit. A screen was set up in the center of the room, and washing utensils, hot cloth towels, and every other necessity had been

prepared. A screen with a beautiful woman painted on it served as a partition between the interior and exterior; the exterior was for entertaining guests, while the interior had one large bed for the master and a small bed for a guest. After the eunuchs withdrew, Chen Xing walked around and, noticing that there were beds both inside and outside the screen, wondered if Xiang Shu would return to this room later as well. Then he lay down to sleep on the large bed with his clothes on.

The Great Chanyu, huh, Chen Xing thought as he tossed and turned. Xiang Shu had revealed a lot of information to Chen Xing in front of Fu Jian. From the looks of it, Xiang Shu and Fu Jian were very close. Chen Xing's hopes of recruiting a protector grew dimmer and dimmer.

Chen Xing waited for a long while, but there was no sign of Xiang Shu, so he fell asleep. He didn't know how long he slept, and he was in a bleary state when he heard a noise from the door—someone had entered.

"Get up," Xiang Shu's voice rang out. Chen Xing sat up drowsily, but Xiang Shu stayed standing, looking down at him and then reaching his hand out a little.

Chen Xing was disoriented from sleep and didn't understand what Xiang Shu wanted. *A hug?* He shifted closer, hugging Xiang Shu's waist and leaning on him.

Xiang Shu was stunned, looking at Chen Xing like he was a fool. He lifted Chen Xing and pushed him aside. "Are you crazy?"

Chen Xing woke up in an instant. "What are you doing?!" he said angrily. "You're bullying me again!"

The eunuch outside heard the noise they were making and hurried in, saying, "Great Chanyu, Great Chanyu, let me serve you." But Xiang Shu raised his hand impatiently, motioning for him to leave. Realization dawned on Chen Xing: Xiang Shu wanted him to serve him by changing his clothes.

"Why should I serve you?" The expression Xiang Shu made was extremely unsightly, but Chen Xing suddenly noticed a purplish patch on Xiang Shu's cheekbone. The bruise was obviously new. Astonished, he asked, "You picked a fight with Fu Jian?"

Looking impatient, Xiang Shu sat down on the edge of the bed, but Chen Xing just sat there in a daze, so Xiang Shu had to change by himself. He untied his belt, revealing snow-white underclothes. *I'm the one who bought this set of clothes for you*, Chen Xing thought.

Xiang Shu was obviously in a bad mood, so Chen Xing went to hang up Xiang Shu's outer garment and fetched some hot water for him to wash his face with. When he threw the cloth into the bronze basin, water splashed all over Xiang Shu's lapel.

Xiang Shu stared at him.

"I don't know how to serve people," Chen Xing said. "I've never served anyone before. Don't treat me as your servant. If you want to chase me away, I'll leave right now. You may be the Great Chanyu, but I'm not afraid of you."

Xiang Shu took a deep breath; he really wanted to roll his sleeves up and hit this man. But as the Great Chanyu, beating up a young man who lacked the strength to even truss a chicken would be disgraceful, so he had to let it go. He pointed at the other bed to convey that Chen Xing should get his ass over there to sleep.

Chen Xing climbed onto the other bed. "For now," Xiang Shu said calmly, "you're allowed to live in the palace on the condition that you get to the bottom of a matter."

Covering himself with the blanket, Chen Xing faced the wall and lay motionless on his side.

Xiang Shu glanced at Chen Xing's back. "That matter is where the disturbance of the drought fiends started, and who the masterminds behind it are. Hear that?"

"I'm listening!" Chen Xing answered impatiently.

The more Chen Xing thought about it, the more annoyed he became. Xiang Shu obviously didn't think much of him, but when he really thought about it, he realized that it was as it should be. The two of them were not related to each other in any way, so he had no right to boss Xiang Shu around. He was forced to swallow his anger.

“Okay, got it,” he said. “I’ll investigate it. But, if necessary, you’ll have to provide me with assistance.”

Yet Xiang Shu refused. “I don’t have that kind of time to spare.”

“You—!”

Chen Xing couldn’t help turning over. He had a few sarcastic remarks on his lips, such as *If you’re so amazing, why’d you get yourself locked up in a big prison under Xiangyang? If I hadn’t magnanimously saved you, you’d probably be dead by now…* When he saw Xiang Shu’s extremely handsome profile as he was lying down under the night lights, though, Chen Xing’s anger wholly dissipated, and the complaints he harbored couldn’t leave his mouth.

Never mind, never mind. If nothing else, he’s someone I saved. If I want to blame anyone, I can only blame myself for my bad luck.

“I don’t need you to follow me,” Chen Xing said instead. “I need to check Chang’an’s official books and records from the previous dynasty, so I’ll still have to investigate in the city. You just have to make it convenient for me.”

Xiang Shu didn’t answer. Chen Xing knew he had heard him, so he turned back and slept.

It was the smoothest and warmest sleep he’d had in several days. Winter was gone, and spring had come. He slept until the sun had risen three poles high. Two or three peach blossoms bloomed in the palace courtyard.

Chen Xing was awakened by voices outside. It was so noisy beyond the screen that for a moment, he thought that he had been stealthily sold into a market beyond the Great Wall while he slept.

Xiang Shu had already changed, washed up, and eaten his breakfast. He wore a dark blue brocade gown embroidered in gold with an eagle, wolf, snake, fox, crane, bear, and so on—the sixteen totems of the Hu in the Ancient Chi Le Covenant. He wore his hair in braids, and three gemstone rings shone on his left hand. A dark gold belt with a soaring dragon on it

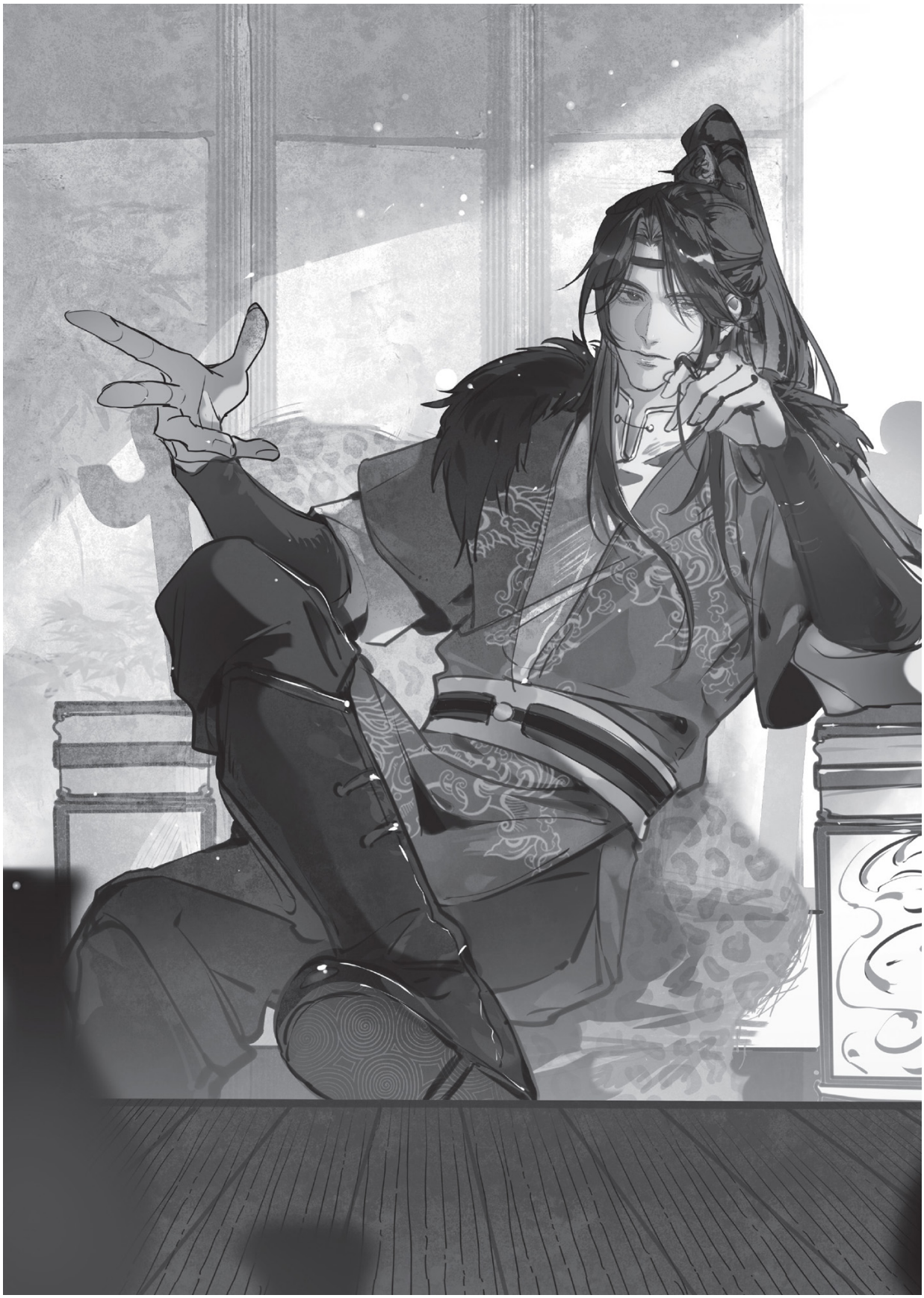
was tied around his waist, and black deerskin boots covered his feet. His eyes were a bright, deep black and shone like stars, and he wore a grave and stern expression on his face. His overall air was indolent, like a wild animal that had entrenched itself on the couch in the middle of the hall; with one foot propped on a short wooden table, he faced the Hu people who packed the hall to the brim.

Nevertheless, his appearance really wasn't boorish, especially now that his handsome face was all tidied up. With his fair complexion and vermillion lips, he seemed like a white jade statue wrapped in brocade, betraying not the slightest hint of a martial man's ferocity.

Chen Xing walked out from behind the screen dressed in a snow-white unlined garment. The clamor in the hall died down at once, and everyone's gazes quickly shifted to this thin young Han man. He and Xiang Shu looked at each other for a brief moment, then Chen Xing immediately went back behind the screen to change and wash up.

Listening to the voices beyond the screen, he could roughly guess that this group of people had come forward to put their laments to Xiang Shu. Each of them belonged to a different tribe beyond the Great Wall. Beyond the Five Hu, who had already entered the pass, there remained other tribes that held a fair amount of power, such as the Tiele, Rouran, and Shiwei, as well as many other remote branches of the Xiongnu people who weren't under the jurisdiction of the government. These Hu, who were even more coarse than the Five Hu on this side of the pass, were called "Hybridized Hu" by the Han.

Some of the talk was in the Xianbei dialect, which Chen Xing had learned before. It seemed that these dozens of Hu people were complaining about the policy of respecting the Han and rejecting the Hu. They all hoped that Xiang Shu would take a stand as the Great Chanyu and support the Hu who had immigrated into the pass. They were even throwing around phrases like "overthrow Fu Jian," "revere Xiang Shu as the Emperor of the North," and "re-establish the country."



Xiang Shu listened quietly and didn’t reply. *This bunch really aren’t afraid of death*, Chen Xing thought. *They’re openly suggesting how to get rid of the emperor right under Fu Jian’s nose.* When he went around the screen again, he saw that his breakfast had already been set out on a small table in the hall, placed on a copper plate as if it were dog food. Chen Xing just minded his own business as he ate. He noticed that Xiang Shu had already finished drinking his cup of milk tea, but he was turning the gemstone-studded silver cup over and over in his hands, fiddling with it.

“I want to go to the Ministry of Works,” Chen Xing said suddenly, but his voice was drowned out by the general noise. Xiang Shu ignored him, too, though Chen Xing knew that he must have heard him. He stared at him, but Xiang Shu just looked dazed, gently flicking the cup with his finger. Chen Xing called out his name a few more times, until finally, he couldn’t tolerate it anymore.

“Shulü Kong!” he roared.

This, at last, captured Xiang Shu’s attention. “Who do you think you’re talking to?!” he shouted impatiently.

Xiang Shu’s voice was like a clap of thunder, and the people in the hall were stunned silent. Here they were, a crowd of Hu people both young and old, and Chen Xing dared to be so rude? How could they stand by and let this happen? All at once, they began to draw their knives and daggers, denouncing him. Brandishing their weapons, they closed in, blades flashing as they surrounded him.

Chen Xing was flabbergasted. Xiang Shu looked at him like he was challenging him and raised an eyebrow slightly. He’d thought that Chen Xing would cower in fear and beg for mercy, but to his surprise, Chen Xing wasn’t in the least bit afraid.

“Where did this Han come from?!”

“Kill him! Kill him!” One of them held a dagger against Chen Xing’s throat, gesturing as he turned his head to look at Xiang Shu. “Is it okay to kill him?”

“It’s not okay!” Chen Xing retorted, like a chicken waiting to be slaughtered. “I’m busy!”

He had never been afraid of death. Most things didn’t matter much to someone who knew he only had a few more years to live.

Patiently, Chen Xing explained, “I want to go to the Ministry of Works to look up the list of old residences from when Chang’an was being repaired.”

“Do you know who you’re talking to?” Xiang Shu said coldly.

“You’re their Great Chanyu, not mine. We agreed on this last night. If you want my help, you’ll have to provide assistance.”

For a moment, Xiang Shu studied Chen Xing with a dangerous glint in his eyes. Then, finally, he made a gesture and dismissed the Hu who were surrounding Chen Xing with their weapons drawn. “Guards,” he said calmly.

An imperial guard entered immediately. Chen Xing smoothed his robes grumpily, got up, and left with the guard.

Chapter 12

OUTSIDE, THE IMPERIAL GUARD glanced apprehensively at Chen Xing.

“I’m not in the habit of hacking at people out of nowhere like Shulü Kong does,” Chen Xing reassured him. “Don’t worry. You just need to take me to the Ministry of Works and help me explain the situation.”

The guard quickly waved his hands, as if he was anxious. Evidently, he couldn’t speak the Han language. His eyes landed on the ring on Chen Xing’s finger, and when he saw it, he gave Chen Xing a slight, hasty bow, seemingly ill at ease.

Chen Xing remembered now: Tuoba Yan had casually plucked this simple but luminous stone ring off his own finger and given it to Chen Xing as a gift. In the Xianbei language, he asked, “Where is Tuoba Yan?”

The guard bowed and gestured for Chen Xing to wait where he was, then turned around and trotted away to deliver the message, leaving a confused Chen Xing behind.

Before long, a figure dressed in a dark red martial robe, with a crescent wolf fang dagger about a foot long at his belt, turned the corner. He passed through the courtyard of Weiyang Palace, which was filled with spring flowers fluttering in the breeze, and then the dashing, elegant figure resolved into Tuoba Yan.

Chen Xing beamed. “Tuoba-xiong!”

Tuoba Yan smiled back sunnily. He scrutinized their surroundings, seeming a little embarrassed. “Where are you going? I’ll go with you.”

“No, no,” Chen Xing said hurriedly, “I’d be causing you too much trouble.”

But Tuoba Yan’s smile didn’t waver. “It’s all right, being on duty is boring anyway. I’ll walk around with you.” He removed a bracelet strung with lapis lazuli beads from his wrist and handed it to Chen Xing. “Here, a gift for you,” he said warmly.

“No, no, no!” Chen Xing protested. “Why are you giving me another gift? I was thinking of returning the ring to you!”

Every time they saw each other, Tuoba Yan tried to give Chen Xing another gift! It left Chen Xing in quite the situation. The two of them went back and forth for a time; Chen Xing wanted to take off the ring to give it back, but it was stuck on his finger and he couldn’t get it off. He insisted that he dared not accept it, but Tuoba Yan was adamant: “I’ve already given it to you. How could I be so rude as to ask for it back?”

In the end, Chen Xing had no choice but to continue wearing the ring, and he returned to the matter at hand. After he explained his purpose in coming here, Tuoba Yan pondered for a moment, then said readily, “Okay, I’ll take you there.”

There were many guards in the palace, and they were clearly well-disciplined. They came and left as silently as the wind, and their eyes never strayed. The moment the patrolling guards saw Tuoba Yan, they stepped aside to make way, even bowing and saluting him in the Xianbei style.

A carriage was waiting at the entrance of the palace. Tuoba Yan invited Chen Xing to get in first. He did so, and as Chen Xing was moving to make space for Tuoba Yan, Tuoba Yan pulled down the curtain and vaulted onto a horse, riding along beside him instead. The imperial guards cleared the way, and the Regular Mounted Attendant accompanied the procession—this was a level of special treatment typically reserved solely for the Great Qin’s Son of Heaven himself. It made Chen Xing uncomfortable.

He parted the curtains slightly and peeked outside. In the same moment, Tuoba Yan glanced in, and their eyes met. Tuoba Yan pointed at the hand he was holding the reins with, motioning for Chen Xing to look at the ring on his own hand.

“You’ve been wearing it this entire time?” Tuoba Yan asked.

“Uh, yes.” Chen Xing was starting to feel that something was amiss. Tuoba Yan was acting too ardently toward him. There was no way Tuoba Yan could have fallen in love with him at first sight, right? He wasn’t sure if

Tuoba Yan treated everyone like this, or if this was special treatment just for Chen Xing.

Tuoba Yan really didn't seem like a Xianbei at all; he was more like a Xiongnu. He never talked in a roundabout way, and this came through again as he asked, "Why are you following the Great Chanyu? What kind of relationship do the two of you have?"

Asking this question was like poking a hornet's nest, and Chen Xing couldn't hold back anymore. He extended a hand from inside the carriage and grabbed Tuoba Yan's lapel. "Listen to this. Listen to me very carefully…"

With that, Chen Xing described the whole story of how he got to know Xiang Shu. Tuoba Yan listened with a bemused expression; by the time Chen Xing was finished, they'd arrived at the entrance to the Ministry of Works. Tuoba Yan nodded at him.

As soon as the officials saw Tuoba Yan, they all saluted him. The two of them walked through the Ministry, not a single soul around them, and finally arrived at the place where the dossiers were stored.

"That's why," Chen Xing explained, "I now have to figure out why the officials are being shuffled around."

"So that's how this all happened," Tuoba Yan mused. He smiled again. "And here I thought you were family to the Great Chanyu. People have always said that he and the Han are like that."

"Like what?" But as soon as the words left his mouth, Chen Xing realized what Tuoba Yan meant. It was something along the lines of *I thought you were the Great Chanyu's wife.* To avoid the awkwardness of saying this aloud, they both fell silent.

Under Fu Jian's reign, the imperial court still followed the system of the Three Departments that had been used during the Jin Dynasty. The ministries within the Department of State Affairs were further divided into the Ministries of Personnel, Palaces, War, Farming, Revenue, and Works. The Ministry of Personnel was mainly in charge of the promotion and demotion of officials. The Ministry of Palaces managed the imperial family and royal court, rites, and other such ceremonies. The Ministry of War was

responsible for conscription and waging wars. The Ministry of Farming was in charge of the entire country's farms, land, irrigation works, and construction matters, while the Ministry of Revenue was in charge of finances. Finally, the Ministry of Works handled all affairs related to forced labor and population shifts. The Six Ministries commanded fifteen sub-agencies, and each sub-agency had a director who was in charge of all political affairs, no matter how big or small.

This office of the Ministry of Works was the counterpart of the ones in Chang'an, Luoyang and other cities. At that time, except for some military officials in the imperial court, almost all of the civil officials were Han, and all written exchanges were conducted in the Han language. It wasn't that the court didn't want to employ Hu people, but rather that the younger generations within the Five Hu were only familiar with destruction and didn't understand how to govern a country. The languages they used weren't uniform, either; they couldn't read, and as soon as they started quarreling, they couldn't hold themselves back from cursing the other party out for being a barbarian. A group of noisy, fighting brutes wouldn't end up getting anything done, so in the end, they had no choice but to turn to the Han people for help.

Fu Jian had been well-versed in the classics since he was young and had always yearned for the Confucian Classics to flourish in popularity in the Central Plains. He knew that although the Hu people had dominated the North by force, their hegemony would not last long. Besides, war always depended on timing, along with the geographical and social conditions of the moment. The sole reason the Han had been the weaker ones over the past hundred years was that the Jin Dynasty had been addicted to carnal pleasures; when it came to warfare, the Han were not in the least bit sloppy. Since time immemorial, from the time when Emperor Qinzhuang retreated to Xirong to save the Zhou royal family to the advent of the Eastern and Western Han Dynasties and even the Cao-Wei Dynasty, the Han had always possessed the military prowess to assault the tribes beyond the Great Wall until they tucked their tails between their legs and ran. The names of Li Guang, Wei Qing, Huo Qubing, and other such heroes and great generals of yore struck fear into the hearts of every Hu person.

This was why Fu Jian had issued a strict order for all Hu tribes beyond the Great Wall to change their customs and start reading Han books. Otherwise, they might as well just be playing pretend. They had to take advantage of these few decades in which the Han were temporarily unable to fight back to quickly unify the world. If they waited for the masters of the Central Plains to snap out of their stupor, there would be no guarantee of how things would end up.

Someone who was being personally escorted by Tuoba Yan himself, the director of the Ministry of Works knew, was not an individual he could afford to offend. He personally retrieved all the files in the city from the past hundred years for Chen Xing to peruse.

"You can understand this script?" Tuoba Yan asked. The silk fabrics, packed densely together, were covered in square characters that looked like heavenly scripture to him.

"Of course! If nothing else, I *am* Han."

The director put his head in his hands and glanced at Chen Xing, conveying that he should watch his words around these Hu barbarians, lest he manage to offend them. Chen Xing sat and bowed slightly, understanding that he meant well. "My lords, please take your time," the director said, and let them be.

"Is this an ancient script?" Tuoba Yan asked. "Not many Han people would be able to recognize this style of writing."

Chen Xing smiled. "I've been studying this style of writing since I was a child by reading and composing essays. I tagged along with my father all the time as a child, and eventually I absorbed the knowledge necessary to read this."

Tuoba Yan went to roll up the curtains a little, allowing natural light to spill in. The streets of Chang'an were planted with pear trees, and every now and then a few snow-white petals floated through the air. The spring air was also relaxing and pleasantly fragrant.

“Can you recite the Song of the Yue Boatman?”[23] Tuoba Yan asked out of nowhere.

Chen Xing didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. He flipped open a file and recited,

“What night is tonight, that we are rowing on this river?
What day is today, that I share a boat with my prince?
The prince’s kindness makes me shy
And I take no notice of the people’s mocking cries
My heart fills with longing, for I yearn to know my prince…”

Tuoba Yan smiled and jumped in. “There are trees on the mountains, and branches on the trees.”

“I adore you, yet you do not even see me,” Chen Xing finished absently.

The two of them sat upright on a broad couch. Chen Xing drew his robes around him and respectfully removed the documents that had been sealed into a wooden box hundreds of years ago. To the best of his ability, he pieced together the scraps of paper and restored the map of Chang’an as it had been during the Han Dynasty.

Chen Xing’s movements made him look like he was performing a magic trick, and Tuoba Yan watched from one side. For a while, the only sounds in the room were those of rustling paper scraps. Chen Xing had pieced together half of Chang’an’s map before realizing that Tuoba Yan was staring at him. He figured that it had to do with the glance the director had given him before, and there was a nagging thought in his head that there were far too many subtleties between the Hu and Han peoples of Chang’an. They were separated by a vast river that was too hard to cross, and they were always watching one another vigilantly from the other side.

The Hu were wary of the Han, but this wariness bore a slight tinge of admiration, as if the Han were from another plane of existence—like immortals who had fallen into the mortal world. The Five Hu tribes didn’t know how to deal with the Han for the time being, so they just madly, foolishly rounded up the once-superior masters of the Central Plains and

wantonly humiliated them to vent their feelings and express their destructive desire.

“Do you want to learn how to read Han characters?” Chen Xing asked Tuoba Yan.

“I want to, but I’ve never been able to pick them up.”

Chen Xing guessed that most of the scholars in Chang’an City were fed up with the Hu and had no interest in teaching them, nor could they be bothered to learn the language of a barbarian tribe like the Xianbei. As a result, the Han would only teach them when they had the spare time to do so. The Hu would be lucky to learn anything, and if they couldn’t, well, too bad for them.

Thus, Chen Xing magnanimously wrote out a poem—“Marching On and On,” the first of the *Nineteen Old Poems*.[24] This was the first poem his father had taught him when he was learning to read. He then added the phonetic notation for every word in the Xianbei language.

“Marching on and on, living far from my lord,” Tuoba Yan recited, making a serious effort to read the Han characters. “We stand more than a thousand miles apart, each of us at opposite ends of the sky.”

Chen Xing found the document showing blueprints of buildings in Chang’an from the Han Dynasty, almost three hundred years in the past. He began to retrieve the other drawings from that year. When Tuoba Yan finished his recitation, Chen Xing asked, “Did His Majesty Fu Jian ask you all to read the books of the Han people and study them in detail?”

“Not only that,” Tuoba Yan said helplessly, “we are even tested on our mastery on the first and fifteenth of every month. When I was learning the Han language, it was Wang Meng-daren who taught me.”

Tuoba Yan spoke the Han language fluently, but he couldn’t read it. Fortunately, Fu Jian knew that reading Han characters wasn’t easy for the military officers, so the assessment criteria for them weren’t as strict as they were for civil officials.

“Wang Meng, huh.” Chen Xing hadn’t heard that name in a long time. He paused, his mind racing, then went to the shelf to take down the

drawings for the year he needed. “It sounds like His Majesty likes the Han people a lot.”

Tuoba Yan gazed at the parchment in front of him, then looked up slightly, his gaze darting to Chen Xing and away again. “The decree issued earlier this year stated that if we were to intermarry with you Han people, we would receive an additional pension. For officials at the fifth rank and above, the Emperor will bestow a pair of heirloom jades and personally preside over the wedding ceremony, no matter the official’s tribe.”

Chen Xing smiled. “Then does Tuoba-xiong intend to take a Han wife?”

Tuoba Yan’s face flushed red. Seeing Chen Xing go up on tiptoe to reach a scroll on the top shelf of a bookcase, he got up to help him take down the whole bundle of scrolls. Then he pointed a finger upward and replied, “I want to wait a little longer, because His Majesty has a decree that has not yet been divulged to the nation at large.”

“Oh?” Chen Xing reached out to take the scroll. “What decree?”

“When the time comes, anyone, man or woman, can be taken as a wife,” Tuoba Yan said solemnly.

The scrolls went plummeting to the floor. Chen Xing didn’t catch them in time, and they scattered across the ground.

Tuoba Yan quickly bent over to help him pick them up. “And only you Han people still oppose this decree. Otherwise, it would’ve passed by now.”

“That’s nonsense!” Chen Xing protested hotly. “How can two men get married? His Majesty is being too licentious!”

“Why can’t they get married?”

“Well…”

Tuoba Yan explained the situation then, and Chen Xing stacked the scrolls neatly as he listened. Fu Jian, he learned, had a desire in his heart. Several years ago, Fu Jian had become dearly fond of the siblings Princess Qinghe and Murong Chong, and he was especially serious about his feelings for Murong Chong, whom he even went so far as to call

Fenghuang-er.[25] He cared little about the opinions of the populace on this matter.

Since ancient times, if superiors had certain interests, their subordinates would follow their example. All the aristocratic clans began to imitate Fu Jian, especially those with military backgrounds. They often took pleasure in pursuing beautiful young men and engaging them in romantic relationships. The customs of Chang'an thus grew more and more remarkable. Men from noble families would, in name, become sworn brothers, but in reality, they were effectively married. Such arrangements were held in high esteem.

Meanwhile, the Han of Chang'an thought, *If you want to adopt a boy toy, then just adopt a boy toy. It's all left over from what our ancestors were doing. Such goings-on have occurred since Liu Bang's time, but to insist on airing out these matters in broad daylight, there must be something wrong with you*.

When Fu Jian saw what his future was going to look like, he sighed with regret and found it even harder to let go of Murong Chong, who had gone far away to Hejian's Pingyang City to take up a post as its prefectural chief. For his own sake, Fu Jian was determined to implement a new marriage policy throughout the country. He would make it acceptable for all men of the right age, no matter if they were Hu or Han, to marry another man. It was as if he intended to use this new decree to tell Murong Chong how he felt.

The Han civil officials collectively erupted. In what world was that acceptable?! It was a subversion of ethics, a disruption of yin and yang, a violation of the natural order! It went against the teachings of their ancestral sages! Mencius wrote that there were three ways to be unfilial and having no heir was the worst—what about the issue of childbearing?

Fu Jian's response to that was that he could take concubines, and adoption was an option as well, right?

No way, no way! The civil officials were in an uproar, rushing to petition him to change this course of action. Putting aside the problem of bearing future generations, men marrying men would be the joke of the

century! No one had ever heard of such a thing! Of course, these scholars also feared that if male marriage was legalized, they themselves would be forcibly taken as wives by the Hu military officials. That would be the utmost disgrace!

"A man from a non-native tribe becoming the emperor of China was unheard of since ancient times, too, and yet here I am on the throne," Fu Jian had pointed out. "What's the problem with that?"

Chen Xing quickly said, "Yes, yes, yes, I'm the one fettered by old conventions. I need to keep an open mind and learn to accept new things."

Tuoba Yan looked back down at the poem, suddenly shy. "When I saw you, um…I…"

The conversation was taking a dangerous turn. Fu Jian wanted to encourage the Hu and Han to intermarry, and he encouraged marriage between men as well. *Is there another meaning behind the words you spoke today, then?*

"So?" Chen Xing asked warily. "So what?"

"So, I thought that you were the Great Chanyu's…wife," Tuoba Yan said seriously.

"How could I be his wife?!" Chen Xing roared, barely restraining himself from flipping the table. "And even if we were married, he would be *my* wife! Wait, no! This isn't a problem of who would be whose wife! I have nothing to do with that bastard…"

Meanwhile, within Weiyang Palace:

"*Achoo!*" Xiang Shu suddenly sneezed, startling everyone in the hall.

Over the past few days, a new wave of visitors had replaced the previous batch. As soon as news got out that Young Master Shulü Kong had entered the capital, the various aristocratic clans of Chang'an rushed to the palace to matchmake him with their scions. Fu Jian was extremely generous toward his old friends from beyond the Great Wall, so what awaited Xiang Shu was, at the very least, a high position in his court. Although there was still no word on the specific title he would receive, it could not be any lower

than that of Grand Commandant.[26] Besides, Xiang Shu had the support of the Ancient Chi Le Covenant behind him. If these clans didn't come to offer betrothals now, they would be too late!

Eldest sons were to inherit the family business, so the young men the families brought were, without exception, younger sons. Some fathers and brothers also brought along portraits of their daughters or sisters for the Great Chanyu to appraise. It didn't matter if Xiang Shu preferred men or women; they'd send all their eligible children in for consideration!

Xiang Shu was irritated by all the hubbub, but the visitors were all of noble descent, so he had to greet them properly. He wasn't allowed to just beat them up and kick them out. The hall was packed with young men, and each one's face was as pretty as a picture. There were Xianbei people, Xiongnu people, Di people, and so on and so forth, each clad in their own people's style. The attendants of six or seven aristocratic families of the Five Hu also kept shoving portraits in Xiang Shu's face.

One by one, the handsome young men poured cups of tea for Xiang Shu. This was part of the courting etiquette practiced by the members of the ancient covenant; it originated from the nomadic people beyond the Great Wall. When a young man paid his love a visit and the young lady took a fancy to him, she would pour him a cup of tea to indicate that they could get to know each other. When they were free, they would then go on a horseback ride together, and with the sky as the blanket and the earth as their bed, they would enjoy a vigorous tumble. On the other hand, if the woman didn't fancy the man, then she would not come out, and her fathers and brothers would serve the man tea instead. That communicated to the man, "You're uglier than expected, so get lost already." Over time, this evolved into a custom where handing over a cup of hand-brewed milk tea meant that the bearer was offering their hand in marriage.

Xiang Shu really didn't get it. If Fu Jian wanted to screw Murong Chong, couldn't he just go ahead and screw him? Why did he need to have the entirety of Chang'an scrambling to take up his interests? When the cups of milk tea were brought to him, he didn't drink from any of them, because taking a sip from any family's cup would be an expression of tacit consent on his part that they could try for a betrothal.

There were so many families, and they were all Hu nobles, so Xiang Shu couldn't reject them outright. Instead, he said, "I will send someone to deliver the untouched milk teas back to you, and the same for any empty cups." Then he glanced to the side to check the time in the copper water clock, and his face scrunched up in a frown.

Finally, at almost dusk, his visitors began to file out. Xiang Shu had found a lot of leads that day and he had to ponder over them. Just as he was about to get up, he saw a silhouette hovering outside. "Yuwen Xin?" he called out. "What's the matter? Come in."

Yuwen Xin walked in, grinning from ear to ear. Not all of the various families' sons had left yet, and the ones who were still hanging around turned to glare at him. Xiang Shu wanted to ridicule him a little, but Yuwen Xin beamed and prostrated himself on the ground. "Great Chanyu! This lowly one was truly as blind as a bat last night!"

Xiang Shu looked at him coldly. You couldn't hit someone who was smiling, and since Yuwen Xin had gone to such great lengths, Xiang Shu wasn't going to just blow up at him. "How many siblings do you have?" he asked. "Leave their portraits here."

Yuwen Xin chuckled. He went off to the side and poured out a cup of milk tea, then, under Xiang Shu's suspicious gaze, presented it to Xiang Shu personally, a little sheepish. "Great Chanyu, I have no siblings, but I've always—"

"Get out."

Yuwen Xin set down his cup, trying to make his way over to hug Xiang Shu's legs. "Great Chanyu, I've always admired you," he said earnestly. "Over the years, I've put off getting married because I hoped that I would one day catch a glimpse of you, as I've had the honor of doing today. I'm willing to devote myself wholly to you, and—"

Dodging Yuwen Xin's embrace, Xiang Shu lifted his foot and literally kicked him right out of the hall.

"Send someone to tell Jiantou," Xiang Shu yelled angrily, "to confiscate all of the Yuwen family's property and send the entire family

back to Youzhou. They're forbidden from entering the pass again for the next hundred years."

Yuwen Xin was aghast. He didn't know what he had done wrong. "Great Chanyu, have mercy!" he cried, dropping to his knees in the courtyard. Although he didn't know whether Fu Jian would listen to Xiang Shu and really confiscate his family's property, he feared that once Xiang Shu was appointed to his official position, he would come and cause trouble for him.

As he was begging for mercy, a beautiful lady entered from outside and walked straight into the palace hall without waiting for anyone to announce her presence. When he glanced over, Xiang Shu saw that it was Princess Qinghe. Looking at the scene before her, she seemed like she didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"How has the Yuwen family offended you this time?" she asked Xiang Shu. She was already acquainted with Yuwen Xin.

"I don't know!" Yuwen Xin said quickly. "I—"

"I don't know either," said Xiang Shu.

Princess Qinghe looked at them wordlessly.

When Xiang Shu didn't protest, she motioned for Yuwen Xin to get up. She didn't state her purpose in coming, just smiled as she flipped through the portraits on the table. "Ah, looks like a lot of families offered betrothals today. Are there any Han among them?"

"No," Xiang Shu replied coldly.

He and Princess Qinghe were old acquaintances. Seven years prior, during a mounted gathering at the foot of the Yin Mountains, Princess Qinghe had disguised herself as a man to attend the hunt, creating quite a stir. When Xiang Shu and Princess Qinghe bumped into each other the previous night, they hadn't had a chance to talk, so she was probably there to reminisce about the old days with him.

Ignoring Yuwen Xin, who was still standing outside, Princess Qinghe moved to take the tea on the table. "There's so much tea. Are they offerings to the gods?"

“They’re also for the betrothals. You have to marry the person whose cup you drink from.”

Princess Qinghe knew the customs, so she refrained from touching any of the twelve cups of tea lined up in a neat row. Instead, she poured a fresh cup for herself. “I just came from His Majesty’s chambers. I talked so much there that my lips are all dry, so I decided to come by your place to drink some tea.”

Princess Qinghe only appeared gentle and quiet in front of Fu Jian or on occasions where she had to entertain guests. Most of the time, she was accustomed to being free and unfettered, hence the difference in her behavior now compared to the night before. As Xiang Shu turned to face his old friend, his tone softened. “Your younger brother has already been promised to someone, otherwise I’d chase you out, too.”

Princess Qinghe smiled, her eyes twinkling. “Is Shulü-dage certain that there is only one unmarried young man in my family?”

Xiang Shu took a deep breath.

Princess Qinghe sat down. “It’s not that His Majesty wanted to torment you with that mischievous decree of his. I didn’t come here to speak of any betrothals with you, either.” Xiang Shu breathed a sigh of relief. She went on, “I wanted to ask if the Han person you brought yesterday is married. Is he the one who keeps you company?”

“He’s a servant,” Xiang Shu said coldly, “so no.”

“Oh! That’s good, because there is another eligible young man my family could offer.” Xiang Shu stared at her. “His name is Tuoba Yan, and he joined the imperial guard when he was fourteen years old. He turned eighteen this year and has already been in His Majesty’s service for many years. I don’t know why, but yesterday, he took a fancy to that servant of yours at first sight.”

Xiang Shu said nothing.

“Yuwen Xin, I hear that you and this servant are old acquaintances?” Princess Qinghe said warmly.

“Yes, yes,” Yuwen Xin quickly agreed from outside. “His father’s name is Chen Zhe, and his ancestral home is in Jinyang.”

“I heard Yan-er mention him last night,” Princess Qinghe continued cheerily, pretending not to comprehend the expression on Xiang Shu’s face. “So, he’s a renowned Han person! Ever since Yan-er came of age, he has wanted to find a boy from a family like that, and of course, Yan-er just so happens to be the youngest son of the Tuoba clan. If you agree, I’ll speak to His Majesty straight away.”

This left Xiang Shu with no choice but to change his tune. “I can’t meddle in this. He and I are not close.”

Princess Qinghe gave him a skeptical look.

Chapter 13

IN THE MINISTRY OF WORKS'S file room:

"Ah! I've finally found it!" Chen Xing laid out a three-hundred-year-old map of a building in the ancient city of Chang'an. "Where is this?" he asked Tuoba Yan.

Tuoba Yan, responsible for the city's defense, immediately recognized it. "The Songbai Residence on the west side of the city. I'll take you there tomorrow."

Chen Xing wanted to visit the place before sunset, but he remembered that Tuoba Yan had already spent the entire afternoon with him and might still have palace duties, so he wouldn't be able to leave without permission. Chen Xing was about to thank Tuoba Yan and go on his own, but Tuoba Yan insisted on escorting him back to the palace, claiming that he was responsible for ensuring Chen Xing's safety.

Chen Xing couldn't change his mind, so he bade farewell to Tuoba Yan outside the imperial garden. He didn't want to return to the sleeping chambers and see Xiang Shu's face, but there had been some progress in his investigation, so he supposed he ought to inform Xiang Shu. Besides, he could have dinner there.

At that moment, Xiang Shu was listening to Princess Qinghe introduce her cousin, a distant expression on his face. Princess Qinghe and Murong Chong's paternal aunt had married into the Tuoba tribe. Although she held official wife status, she had no children with her husband, and her husband later had a son with a concubine: Tuoba Yan. Tuoba Yan grew up without much attention from his family; his grandmother was the only one who cherished him. After she passed, Tuoba Yan joined the imperial army at age fourteen. He possessed a natural talent for martial arts and wielded the halberd with skill, which made him stand out in martial evaluations. His appearance, as striking as jade, also won him the favor of Fu Jian, who recruited him to serve closely by his side.

However, Tuoba Yan's temperament was markedly different from Murong Chong's. After much consideration, Fu Jian ultimately declined to take Tuoba Yan as a lover, though he still showered Tuoba Yan with considerable affection and nurtured him like a younger brother. Fu Jian even tried to find a suitable marriage partner for him, but despite his efforts, no match seemed appropriate.

Princess Qinghe had even asked Tuoba Yan about it before, but he couldn't articulate what kind of partner he wanted. One preference, however, was clear: he strongly favored Han people.

Until last night, when Tuoba Yan first met Chen Xing at Yuwen Xin's residence and heard Yuwen Xin mention the past, Tuoba Yan had never expressed interest in any particular man. Although the Chen family had fallen into ruin, Chen Xing's father still held considerable prestige among scholars and officials; nearly half of the officials in the Qin court's ministries had been pupils of Chen Zhe. Given their comparable social status and Tuoba Yan's instant infatuation, Princess Qinghe had rushed over to inquire about this boy.

Xiang Shu was surprised to learn about Chen Xing's family background. His usual expression, like a tranquil, ancient well, now rippled, as if he was seeing Chen Xing in a new light. Meanwhile, Yuwen Xin, who was still outside the palace, nodded vigorously, affirming every word Princess Qinghe said with "Yes, yes, yes." He paced back and forth, to Xiang Shu's great agitation—he wanted to find a knife and pin him to a pillar like a fly.

Suddenly, silence fell within the palace—Chen Xing had entered.

"Eh?" Chen Xing looked puzzled.

Immediately, Yuwen Xin was all smiles. "Tianchi!"

"Hello, Xin-ge!" Chen Xing sidestepped Yuwen Xin's attempt to hug him and nodded at Princess Qinghe, who smiled.

"Did you go out with Tuoba Yan?" she asked. Chen Xing was astonished. *How did she know?* "Come, Jiejie will pour you a cup of tea. I have something good to discuss with you later…"

She picked up a teapot, but Chen Xing said, “No need, there’s already tea here, and I’m thirsty!” He picked up a cup from the table and drank it, then another. Soon, he’d emptied all the cups of tea that the Chang’an nobles had poured for their marriage proposals, leaving everyone stunned into silence. Then he picked up a portrait from the table and examined it. “Hm? And what’s this?”

Xiang Shu angrily pressed it down with one hand. “Stop touching things!”

“What’s wrong with taking a look?” Chen Xing grabbed at the folded paper. Xiang Shu pulled on it. Due to his strength, the portrait was torn clean in two. Chen Xing threw the torn paper back at him.

“You…!”

“I have a lead, and I need to get to work,” Chen Xing said, finishing his tea. “Give me some money.” He was thinking of going to the Songbai Residence to investigate while it was still daylight.

Princess Qinghe stood up. “I’ll ask Yan-er to accompany you. I was planning to have him relieved from night duty tonight anyway.”

“No need, no need,” Chen Xing replied quickly. He recalled from their farewell in the imperial garden that Tuoba Yan had been tasked with guarding a banquet for Fu Jian tonight. He gestured toward Xiang Shu.

“I don’t have any money,” Xiang Shu said coldly.

Do you think I can’t just walk there? Chen Xing thought. Without pleading further, he left in a huff.

“Great Chanyu, where were we?” said Princess Qinghe.

Just then, a palace attendant arrived, likely sent by the earlier crowd to gather news. Peeking into the palace hall, he saw all the empty silver, gold, and enamel cups scattered around, as well as the torn pieces of paper. He dashed off at once, delighted.

It took a moment for Princess Qinghe and Xiang Shu to snap out of their stupor. “Come back!” they shouted together.

Xiang Shu leaped up to give chase, but the palace attendant had already vanished from sight. That night, word spread among all the families that the Great Chanyu had consumed all the milk tea they had poured out and torn all the portraits in half. What could this possibly mean? Everyone should hasten to send their youngest sons to the Great Chanyu!

Chen Xing left the palace, studying the map. It was almost dusk. Passing several houses, he heard families setting off firecrackers and, puzzled, assumed they were celebrating a festival. Weiyang Palace was situated near the west side of the city, but despite this proximity, it took him nearly two hours to reach the Songbai Residence. By the time he arrived, it was dark, and the evening drumbeats were echoing in the distance.

On the western side of the city lay a highland thick with pine and cypress trees, with large red lanterns hanging around its perimeter. A row of buildings stood half-hidden in the forest, from which the unrestrained laughter of drunken men could be heard. Chen Xing remembered: when he parted ways with Feng Qianjun, Feng Qianjun had mentioned he'd be staying here.

Chen Xing circled half of the residence's perimeter, but he still couldn't locate the entrance. All he found was a tightly shut gate with two large golden characters gleaming on it: "Xifeng Bank." He wasn't sure what to make of it.

"Is anyone there?" Chen Xing called out. He checked his surroundings against the map in his hands: He was in the right place. He traversed more of the perimeter and found himself outside a dense forest, where he noticed two stones. The leftmost stone was inscribed with the words "Evergreen Pines and Cypresses" and the right stone with "Saber of Harmony and Life."

As Chen Xing walked into the forest along the path, he took several turns and began to sense that something was amiss. Inside, the arrangement of trees and rock formations followed the strategic pattern of the Eight Gates—Rest, Birth, Injury, Restraint, View, Death, Surprise, Open—famously laid out by Zhuge Liang of the Three Kingdoms. Learning how to

break through this array had been Chen Xing's first lesson after he formally became his shifu's student, so navigating it posed no challenge for him. However, he hesitated because such arrays typically indicated restricted access. Would it be too ill-mannered of him to charge right in?

However, as he was about to turn back, he found that he couldn't retrace his steps through the outer Eight Gates. The only way forward was to continue through and exit via the northeast gate, Mount Sheng. Reluctantly, Chen Xing pressed on. As he wandered the labyrinthine paths, he realized the Eight Trigrams array was changing dynamically. He rounded a rock garden, and a grand residence suddenly loomed before him, brightly lit from within and with more than twenty pairs of martial boots lining its corridor.

"Is anyone there?" he called out.

He didn't hear an answer, so he took off his boots and stepped up. He pulled open the sliding door.

"Overthrow Fu Jian! Restore the Great—"

The room was crowded with people seated on the floor, their emotions running high, and their shouting was cut short by Chen Xing's entrance. This residence had excellent soundproofing indeed; no noise could get in or out. Clearly, they were in the midst of a clandestine meeting, perhaps plotting a conspiracy.

"Excuse me," Chen Xing said, "does anyone need tea? If not, I'll be on my way."

He closed the door decisively. A group of people rushed out after him at once, brandishing their knives and swords and pressing them against Chen Xing's neck. Chen Xing couldn't put up any resistance. "I really didn't hear anything!" he exclaimed, putting up both hands.

"Tianchi?" It was Feng Qianjun, sounding surprised. "How did you get in? Stop! He's one of us!"

Chen Xing entered the room with blades held against his neck. In the center stood a spacious couch, upon which sat a man in his twenties,

dressed in loose robes with large sleeves. Feng Qianjun was beside him, sipping from a cup at a low table.

“Stop,” the man said calmly. “Invite the young brother in.” He glanced briefly at Feng Qianjun, who nodded in subtle approval and then waved his hand, signaling for Chen Xing to approach. The group of martial artists who had detained Chen Xing released him and allowed him to walk over to Feng Qianjun.

“Time is short,” the man began. “We have a guest present, but he may listen. Let’s proceed. The catastrophe in Xiangyang was not caused by a momentary error…”

Chen Xing glanced at Feng Qianjun. He had starkly transformed from the man he had journeyed with. He was now clad in a loose robe adorned with intricate patterns of leaves and blossoming flowers, and his ring-pommel blade rested prominently on the central table before him. Such flowery martial attire normally served to enhance the allure of even the most beautiful Xianbei woman, yet on Feng Qianjun, it seemed perfectly suited and strangely appropriate. It gave him a naturally magnificent and commanding presence.

Chen Xing glanced at the man seated at the center, then turned back to Feng Qianjun.

“He’s my older brother, Feng Qianyi,” Feng Qianjun whispered. “A kid like you actually managed to break through the Eight Trigrams array he set up outside? I really underestimated you.”

“I…I broke through it by accident. What are you all doing?”

“Plotting a rebellion, of course. Isn’t it obvious?”

“I could sense that,” Chen Xing replied earnestly. “How far along are you?”

Feng Qianjun sighed. “We haven’t made any progress at all. It’s distressing, y’know? I don’t wanna play along with them anymore.”

“Fu Jian’s perverse actions have angered both the heavens and the people. There is much resentment among the Di, Xianbei, and Xiongnu tribes. You two, stop whispering down there,” Feng Qianyi said, tapping the

table with the ruler in his hand. “The Great Chanyu from beyond the Great Wall has entered Chang’an and sent a clear signal. Perhaps, before long, all the tribes in the city will unite to overthrow Fu Jian…”

When Chen Xing heard this, the corners of his mouth twitched. “No matter how I look at it, the relationship between those two seems fine,” he whispered. “Feng-dage, are you sure the source of this news is trustworthy?”

Feng Qianjun gestured for him to raise his questions later. Feng Qianyi addressed the crowd again. “Next, I’ll let my younger brother tell everyone about what he saw and heard on the road to the capital from Xiangyang.”

Feng Qianjun cleared his throat and began to describe the hostility of the Hu people in the Central Plains toward Fu Jian. Feng Qianyi added that Fu Jian had been in power for many years and, in accordance with the plan made by the famous official Wang Meng, had formulated the nation’s so-called “Respect the Han and Reject the Hu” policy. Not only did he fail to please the Han people, however, but he also offended the Hu who were backing him. Now, the Five Hu were all voicing open discontent and beginning to oppose Fu Jian. The Great Qin may have seemed to possess a military force as strong as the sun at noon, but the truth was that after Wang Meng’s death, internal politics became complicated, and the Great Qin’s forces had been teetering on the verge of collapse for a long time.

Everyone was in high spirits after hearing this. They felt as though all of Chang’an—Hu and Han alike—was about to storm the imperial palace at Feng Qianyi’s call to action and tear that incompetent ruler, Fu Jian, to pieces.

Feng Qianjun finished detailing the situation without making any additional comments. Feng Qianyi, who was presiding over the meeting, waited for the room to quiet down before he continued: “This is the current state of affairs. As everyone moves about the Central Plains, the South has already allocated significant funds to support our grand undertaking to expel the barbarians and rejuvenate the Han Dynasty. Next year will be a critical period, so we must not be negligent.”

Perhaps it was because there was a guest present, or perhaps the theme of the day's conference was different, but Feng Qianyi didn't delve deeply into matters related to the rebellion. He provided a brief summary of the month's events and the year's outlook, and the meeting was adjourned.

All the Jianghu martial experts stood up and filed out. They were respectful and polite to Feng Qianyi during their conversations, but they treated Feng Qianjun like they would anyone else; some even appeared to look down on him a little. After everyone had left, Feng Qianjun picked his brother up and placed him in a wooden wheelchair nearby. It was only then that Chen Xing realized Feng Qianyi's legs were immobile and he required assistance.

"Come, let's go get dinner. You must be hungry," Feng Qianjun said, handing the ring-pommel blade to his elder brother. Feng Qianyi placed the blade on his knees, gripping it tightly by the handle. Feng Qianjun turned to Chen Xing and added, "There are still many things that I need to discuss with you."

The three of them headed down the corridor, and before Chen Xing could ask, Feng Qianjun took the lead in explaining things. That was when Chen Xing learned that he had inadvertently intruded into the secret hall of the Songbai Residence.

"You… You're all…" Chen Xing eyed Feng Qianjun skeptically. He recalled Xiang Shu's assessment of Feng Qianjun; indeed, this Jianghu vagabond was not as simple as he seemed.

Feng Qianjun smiled and shrugged. "My true identity is the young master of Xifeng Bank. My elder brother is the current head of our family. The Songbai Residence and Xifeng Headquarters are both part of our family's estate."

Feng Qianyi remained silent, apparently lost in thought on the journey down the dark corridor. Chen Xing observed his surroundings as they exited the corridor and re-entered the courtyard. This place was mysterious and labyrinthine, and after navigating behind the courtyard, they reached a cluster of inns spanning more than one and a half acres. Oddly

shaped pine trees stood sentinel outside the inns, like spirits guarding them in the darkness.

Chen Xing's initial surprise waned as his attention shifted to the surroundings at Xifeng Bank. He wasn't really concerned with the identities of the Feng brothers, anyway. What mattered to him was that this was the location of the three-hundred-year-old ruins of Chang'an's Exorcist Headquarters, which had seemingly been renovated by the Feng family.

Feng Qianyi, seated in his wheelchair, noticed Chen Xing's expression. "The Songbai Residence only accommodates the Han," he said. "The main entrance is on the opposite side. Very few people pass through this rear path."

Feng Qianjun glanced at the drawing in Chen Xing's hand, seeming to come to a realization. They passed through the main hall of the Songbai Residence and arrived at an eerie building.

"Since you are staying with the Great Chanyu, Shulü Kong, I thought that both of you would come here together," Feng Qianyi said politely.

"Uh… He… I'm actually not that familiar with him."

Chen Xing was only there to look for the old address of the Exorcist Headquarters, and somehow he'd bumped into this group of people planning a rebellion. How was he going to get out of this mess? He was realizing that Feng Qianyi intended to make it more difficult for him to distance himself as he learned more about their plans, and it was hard not to connect that with Feng Qianyi's reluctance to let him leave. A growing sense of danger dawned on him. *Don't tell me you want to implicate me in your plans*, he thought.

Chen Xing was open-minded and often chose to let things slide, but a fool he was not. "I'm currently staying with Xiang Shu while I investigate a certain matter," he said. "In a few days, once my investigation is complete, I'll have to leave. Besides, none of those Hu would believe anything I say, and I have my own priorities." His underlying message was clear: *I have no interest in your group's affairs, nor will I rat you out. There's no need to silence me.*

“There’s no harm. I intended to have Qianjun introduce me anyway, and there’s no time like the present. Your arrival today must be fate,” Feng Qinyi said. Chen Xing glanced at Feng Qianjun. “I’ll go make some arrangements. Qianjun, please accompany the Great Exorcist for dinner.”

Chen Xing kept silent. As soon as Feng Qianjun closed the door behind his brother, Chen Xing glanced at him, seeking an explanation.

Feng Qianjun shrugged helplessly, indicating that he had nothing to say. He leaned down slightly to look at Chen Xing.

“How does your elder brother know everything?” Chen Xing exclaimed. “How much did you tell him?”

“Don’t you know what this place is?” Feng Qianjun replied. “What news in the world could be hidden from the head of the Songbai Residence?”

“What exactly do you all do here? It doesn’t seem like your family runs an inn.”

“To be honest, and don’t be upset, Xiandi, but my family’s main businesses are bank operations and moneylending—at a high interest rate.”

Chen Xing examined the imposing architecture of the building complex. “Your family’s pretty rich, huh? I figured.” Looking around, he saw authentic works by Cao Pi hanging on the walls and an ink screen standing in the room.

A servant brought over boxes of food, and Feng Qianjun sat down. “As for our side business,” he said, lifting a pot of boiling water from the stove to make tea, “the Xifeng Bank has another role—it serves as an intelligence-gathering hub spanning the globe, from south to north, both within and beyond the Great Wall. Our intelligence network ranges from major matters, such as the emperor’s family affairs, to minor details like the ancestral lines of commoners across eighteen generations. For a price, we can uncover any intelligence. There is no information under the sun that’s beyond the Feng family’s reach.”

Feng Qianjun was the leader of an intelligence group in Chang’an City. Chen Xing had vastly underestimated him during their journey

together.

When he finished making tea, Feng Qianjun smiled and gestured for Chen Xing to sit. “On our first day in the capital, Xifeng already knew that Xiang Shu was Shulü Kong, the youngest Great Chanyu in the history of the Ancient Chi Le Covenant.”

“And they knew that we broke into the imperial palace at night,” Chen Xing added.

Feng Qianjun nodded. “We also know that you’re the only son of Chen Zhe, a prominent scholar in Jinyang. In his youth, even Yuwen Xin studied under your family. It’s how worldly affairs go; thieves lack scrutiny from the heavens, honest and upright gentlemen are rarely rewarded for their virtue, and scoundrels who commit crimes for which not even death can atone are always—”

“It’s not right to say that,” Chen Xing said, smiling as he took a seat. “We uphold our integrity because it aligns with our beliefs, not for the sake of rewards.”

Feng Qianjun looked surprised for a moment, then gave Chen Xing a reassuring smile. “Yes, yes. You’re much more broad-minded than Dage.” Then, with a probing gaze, he asked, “About Yuwen Xin…”

“Hm?” Chen Xing was distracted, pondering how to inquire about the location of the Exorcist Headquarters’ ruins. He wouldn’t feel right rummaging through boxes or knocking down cabinets in someone else’s home.

But Feng Qianjun, noticing Chen Xing’s expression, said, “Forget it, it’s nothing. Yuwen Xin flatters the powerful and intimidates the weak in Chang’an City. He’s not someone you should get too close to. I just wanted to caution you.”

“I can see that.”

Feng Qianjun gazed quietly at Chen Xing, his expression hinting at some internal struggle. Chen Xing didn’t catch his fleeting look of pity. When they’d finished their meal and tea, he finally cut to the chase. “Feng-dage, to be honest, I came here today because I need a favor from you. Do

you remember when we discussed the Exorcist Headquarters on our way here?”

No sooner did the words leave his mouth than the paper door slid open, and Feng Qianyi said, “My younger brother has already briefed me thoroughly.” He maneuvered his wheelchair into the hall.

Chen Xing said hesitantly, “This is a presumptuous request on my part…”

“No, it isn’t,” Feng Qianyi said. There was a brief silence. “Tianchi, truthfully, our Feng family was a clan of exorcists three hundred years ago. We share the same ancestral profession.”

Chen Xing stood up abruptly, staring at Feng Qianjun in astonishment.

“That’s why I mentioned fate earlier,” Feng Qianyi added nonchalantly. He drew the ring-pommel blade from his knees, gripping the blade with two fingers, and handed the hilt to Chen Xing. “This blade dates back to the Han Dynasty. It’s a precious heirloom passed down through generations. Legend has it that the Saber of Harmony and Life is sealed with the vital energy of verdant wood, and when it appears in the world—”

“It can turn tens of thousands of plants across the Divine Land into soldiers, move verdant mountains, and level gorges,” Chen Xing finished confidently, accepting the blade.

Feng Qianyi’s eyes lit up with surprise. “You knew?!”

Chen Xing had read about many magical artifacts in ancient texts. When he first met Feng Qianjun, he hadn’t paid close attention to his sword, but now, as he held it in his hands, he noticed a row of written characters inscribed on the back of the blade: Saber of Harmony and Life.

Chapter 14

CHEN XING XING LOOKED at the ring-pommel blade for a moment before returning it to its sheath and handing it back to Feng Qianyi. He smiled. “That’s great! So you guys are exorcists, too!” His tone turned sorrowful. “Legends about it have been recorded in ancient texts. Unfortunately, after the Silence of All Magic, magical artifacts are as good as scrap metal.”

As he spoke, Chen Xing fell deep into reminiscence. *Which branch of exorcists did the Feng family belong to?* Unfortunately, most of the documents he read at his shifu’s place only included pictures of the yaoguai, divine weapons, and magical artifacts in the human world; they seldom mentioned exorcist genealogy. After all, all families went through ups and downs during their long history, and some even changed their surnames and nationalities due to the unrest in the Central Plains. There was little meaning in investigating one’s origins.

“All of them?” Feng Qianyi asked, clearly doubtful.

Having heard Feng Qianyi introduce his family, Chen Xing was excited. Like his shifu had said before he went down the mountain, there were still exorcist families in the world. It was only because of the restraints of the Silence of All Magic that magical arts and magical artifacts lay dormant. Over time, if the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth could be restored, these exorcist families would become central forces in the resistance against Mara. Chen Xing could die without regret after completing his arduous task, as there would still be exorcists in the world, and they would take care of the rest.

“Except for the Heart Lamp.” Chen Xing decided that he might as well lay everything on the table. Everyone was on the same side, so there was no need to hide it from Feng Qianyi. Feng Qianjun must’ve told his older brother everything anyway, so Chen Xing took the initiative to emit light from his hands. “The Heart Lamp resides in a human’s body. It exists within my three hun and seven po,[27] so I can glow a bit.”

Chen Xing glanced at Feng Qianjun as he said this, thinking, *You really hid this from me for a really long time*.

“I’m sorry, Tianchi-xiongdi,” Feng Qianjun said earnestly. “I’m strictly prohibited from mentioning anything about my family’s exorcist ancestry to anyone. In fact, the Feng family’s estate and clan members all share a responsibility, which is to guard this divine weapon and wait for the day it regains its glory. Before my father died, he handed it to me. I had my difficulties, too.”

Chen Xing nodded. “It’s all right,” he said magnanimously. “Better safe than sorry.”

“Xiaoxiongdi, you must know what the world is like today,” Feng Qianyi said lightly. “For all these years, the Feng family has fought to liberate the Central Plains. Qianjun embarked on a long and arduous journey from Gusu to answer the call, banking on the slim chance that if the Saber of Harmony and Life really is a so-called ‘magical artifact,’ it would be of great help to our great cause. Xiaoxiongdi, I remember that you’re a Han.”

“Dage,” Feng Qianjun interjected, “Tianchi is thinking of a way to solve all these problems.”

Chen Xing studied Feng Qianyi before looking back at Feng Qianjun, smiling. “This is just the beginning.”

“If we can help, let us know,” Feng Qianjun replied.

“Then I won’t hold back.”

Feng Qianjun motioned for Chen Xing not to get ahead of himself and to let him speak first, then explained to his older brother why Chen Xing was here. Chen Xing quickly spread out the architectural drawings he had retrieved from the Ministry of Works.

“According to my investigation,” he said, “at the end of the Han Dynasty, the headquarters of the Chang’an Exorcism Department were in Mount Song. Did the Xifeng Bank and the Songbai Residence dig anything up when they decided to set up shop here? For example, ancient maps, letters…”

He glanced up to observe Feng Qianyi's expression, then looked at Feng Qianjun, who shrugged. "Our great-grandfather founded the Xifeng Bank," said Feng Qianyi, with the same look on his face as usual. "When Chang'an was built, this place was a barren hill. Are you confident that the headquarters of the Exorcism Department were on this mountain?"

"If the drawings aren't lying," Chen Xing said.

After Chang'an City was trampled and set aflame by Dong Zhou, Li Ru, and the rest at the end of the Han Dynasty, it had been so desolate that there was practically nothing left during the Three Kingdoms period. While it expanded several times during the Jin Dynasty, it suffered through another barrage of plundering from the Five Hu when they headed south. The Xiongnu, Han, and Di peoples all took turns stationing their troops here. Burning came first, followed by pushing, filling, and, eventually, construction. Any hope of finding a three-hundred-year-old brick or piece of wood had vanished long ago, but Chen Xing still held out hope: The room where the Exorcism Department's scrolls had been kept was underground.

"It's right here." Chen Xing pointed to a part of the original building. It was the working drawing of the underground construction. "Our ancestors must have left behind some information regarding the Silence of All Magic. It will become a vital clue."

Feng Qianjun studied the drawings carefully, and then he and his brother exchanged a look.

Chen Xing was puzzled. "Can I follow this route from the drawings to take a look?" he asked, tentatively.

Feng Qianyi gave this some thought. "I'll take Tianchi there, then," said Feng Qianjun.

"You can't get in," Feng Qianyi said. "Never mind. He's one of us, so it won't do any harm for him to enter once."

"Is this place very important?" asked Chen Xing doubtfully.

Feng Qianjun opened his mouth to say something, but his older brother stopped him. "It's the Xifeng Bank storeroom. It connects to the

underground, and it’s where we store all the money.”

At night, during the hai hour,[28] Feng Qianyi leaned back in his wheelchair as he brought Chen Xing to a vast residence. Feng Qianjun only went as far as the door before he stopped, motioning for Chen Xing to follow his brother in while he stood guard outside.

Chen Xing took the lamp that Feng Qianjun handed him, then looked back at him. Feng Qianyi seemed to guess what he was thinking. “Qianjun’s responsibility is to guard the Xifeng Union,” he said lightly. “Only the head of the family and the main teller have ever been allowed in the storeroom.”

Chen Xing expressed his gratitude and followed Feng Qianyi into the residence through a bronze door, which Feng Qianyi opened with a key. Before long, they came to a slope. The corridors on both sides were packed with shelves made of pig iron, which were full of wooden plaques piled with copper coins. Again, Feng Qianyi used a key to open the door after they reached the next floor, which was a storeroom full of silver. Chen Xing held up the lamp to illuminate it, and the entire room dazzled in the light.

This was the most money Chen Xing had ever seen in his life; there were mountains and seas of it. Just walking through the silver room took them a quarter of an hour.

Chen Xing looked down to match the silver storeroom to the drawings. “This topography doesn’t look right.”

“During the Jin Dynasty, our ancestors bought this piece of land from Sima Yue, the Prince of Donghai,” Feng Qianyi said. “To build this place, they recast more than three hundred thousand pounds of molten iron into the four walls of this storeroom.”

Chen Xing looked around. “Is there anything left from the ruins that were cleared out at that time?”

“I’m not sure, since no records were left behind. I’ll take you down to the next floor for a look.”

Chen Xing didn’t doubt him. He let Feng Qianyi lead the way while he looked at the map. When they arrived at yet another door, Feng Qianyi opened it with yet another key.

“It’ll be the gold storeroom next,” Feng Qianyi supplied. “Xiaoxiongdi, please don’t mention this to anyone after you leave this place.”

Chen Xing knew that the reason Feng Qianyi was letting him, an outsider, into the most confidential part of the Xifeng Bank was because they were both exorcists. He was giving him a lot of respect, so Chen Xing quickly thanked him again. But before the door to the gold storeroom opened, Chen Xing realized something, and the lamp in his hand flickered slightly, as if an invisible wind had passed through his body.

What is this?

“Please, come in.”

Light illuminated the storeroom. All the gold inside was locked in boxes, and there was a total of three floors. When Chen Xing reached the last floor, a little bit of hope ignited in him again. “Is there anything else underneath? According to the drawings, this is the headquarters of the Exorcism Department that was stuck at the foot of the mountains.”

Their exorcist predecessors must have chosen this place as their headquarters for a reason. Chen Xing had once read in a book that before the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth disappeared, both heaven and earth had their own ley lines. The direction of the heavens’ spiritual flow was called the heaven vein, while the corresponding one on earth was called the earth vein. The earth vein had many nodes, and occasionally, at weaker places, spiritual qi leaked out. These points were the so-called “blessed paradise” that feng shui pursued.

Chen Xing placed the lamp on a short table, which cast their shadows against a wall. Feng Qianyi kept silent for a moment, then said, “If we continue down, there is another floor yet.” As he spoke, he pushed his wheelchair around a shelf, stopping in front of a wall. A small, black door was embedded in the wall, and there was a wheel on it.

“Would it be okay for me to enter?” asked Chen Xing anxiously.

“Please turn around first,” Feng Qianyi instructed politely. He extended a hand to cover the iron wheel and tried turning it.

There must have been a particular mechanism. As Chen Xing turned around with his back to Feng Qianyi, he heard the grating sound of the iron wheel behind him.

“I’m really very grateful for this,” he said.

“Xiaoxiongdi, you’re too polite. I heard you’re staying in Weiyang Palace right now? It’s not easy for outsiders to get a chance to see that map of yours. Fu Jian must’ve given you a special concession.”

“Sort of…but I’ve actually only met Fu Jian once. And I only arrived in Chang’an last night.”

“Your family was embroiled in the chaos of war,” Feng Qianyi observed as he calibrated the wheel. “I think you must have come to Chang’an to get revenge.”

Chen Xing was stunned. “I never actually thought about that. How can I take revenge with my level of strength? Besides, I have more important things to do.”

The soft sounds of the mechanism continued. “Xiaoxiongdi, although we only met today and it’s not right of me to say this, I’d like to raise a presumptuous question,” Feng Qianyi said. Chen Xing didn’t answer, merely listened, his heart filled with doubt. “Since you live in the palace and you share a good relationship with the Great Chanyu, Shulü Kong, I’m certain you’ll be able to provide us with a bit of assistance. After the Hu entered the pass, a lot of Han were displaced from their homes and forced to wander about, their families ruined. The Jin court watches from across the river, but no one would dare forget the hatred of having our country invaded and our homes destroyed… I dare not let Xiaoxiongdi take any risks; I just wanted to ask if it was possible.”

“Feng-dage.” Chen Xing turned around and faced Feng Qianyi, who was sitting in his wheelchair with his back to Chen Xing. “That won’t do. I can’t do that.”

The sound of the wheel stopped. “I’m not asking you to assassinate Fu Jian,” said Feng Qianyi. “I’m just asking if, when it’s convenient, you might come up with a way to shield the suicide squad under my command

as they enter the palace. I guarantee I would never let you get involved. If our noble cause is successful, you will be greatly rewarded."

"Feng-dage," Chen Xing said sternly, "what's the first ordinance for exorcists? Surely you should know about it."

"I don't," Feng Qianyi replied lightly, lowering his hand. "When I took over as the head of the family, all I knew was that the Feng family once had a glorious past. If the power of the Harmony Saber still existed, how could the Hu cavalry have had the chance to ravage the land within our pass?"

Chen Xing was surprised; from Feng Qianyi's tone, he seemed totally unaware. It had, he supposed, been a very long time. In a gentler tone, he said, "Before I came down the mountain, Shifu exhorted over and over that an exorcist's first ordinance is not to intervene in civil disputes. As the saying goes, 'the path of spirits belongs to spirits, and the path of mortals belongs to mortals,' correct?" He didn't wait for Feng Qianyi's response before continuing, "The second ordinance is—"

"What meaning do ordinances from three hundred years ago hold?" Feng Qianyi asked, his tone turning unkind. "Have you never questioned them?"

"Of course they're meaningful. The Feng family is like me; we all have a more important calling to fulfill, which is to protect the human world. If we really are lucky enough to recover the lost mana, then by that time, I may already be…be… Well, you'll find out later."

Feng Qianyi stopped moving and didn't raise his hand again. Just as Chen Xing was about to turn back again, Feng Qianyi said, "In that case, I no longer have a reason to help you. Please go back."

Chen Xing was stunned.

Feng Qianyi turned his wheelchair around and faced Chen Xing, blocking the way to the last floor of the storeroom. "If your family and relatives all died at the hands of the Di people, would you not want to take revenge?"

“Are you not going to let me in if I don’t agree to your conditions?” Chen Xing asked. Feng Qianyi didn’t answer; he just looked up into Chen Xing’s eyes. “To tell you the truth, I have thought about it. However, I don’t have the spare time to take revenge, and I understand revenge to be useless.”

Chen Xing was beginning to understand that Feng Qianyi didn’t care much about an exorcist’s status. He was the one who had been too clueless. Their goal was to overthrow Fu Jian. Thinking back to the expression on Feng Qianjun’s face, it seemed like he had wanted to say something; Chen Xing thought that Feng Qianyi must have mentioned this request before, but Feng Qianjun refused it.

“If Fu Jian dies, all that will happen is that someone else will take over as emperor and trigger a new type of civil unrest,” Chen Xing said. “It wasn’t easy for the fighting to stop in the North, and the world can only accommodate so much resentment—it’s approaching its limit.”

As he said this, a thought surfaced in Chen Xing’s mind: *The flickering flame in the lamp just now…*

Yet Feng Qianyi replied in a cold voice, “Even though Yuwen Xin personally executed your parents by hanging, you’ve never thought of taking revenge?”

That sentence was like a clap of thunder in Chen Xing’s ears. He took a step back and stared at Feng Qianyi in disbelief. “W…what?”

Now it was Feng Qianyi’s turn to look surprised. He set both elbows on the armrests of his chair with his hands clasped and studied Chen Xing skeptically. “You don’t know? Ah, that’s right, Chen Zhe’s only son disappeared on the day Jinyang City fell. Where have you been all these years?”

“Say that again?” Chen Xing gasped. “Yuwen Xin killed my parents?”

“See,” Feng Qianyi said calmly, “you’re not so unmoved by hatred, are you? It’s just that the knife has not cut you yet, so you don’t know what pain feels like. Chen Tianchi, if you promise—”

“No way,” Chen Xing said. “Why would he do that?!”

Chen Xing’s thoughts were in utter disarray. He had even momentarily forgotten his purpose in being there. The image of Yuwen Xin’s face flooded his mind, and Chen Xing’s whole body turned cold, as if he had just fallen into a cave of ice. Under Feng Qianyi’s gaze, a chill filled the entire storeroom, spreading in all directions. The flame within the lamp gradually weakened, and the shadows the pair of them cast on the walls seemed to slowly melt away.

However, right at that moment, footsteps approached and a loud noise came from the gold storeroom’s door.

“Chen Xing!” Feng Qianjun’s voice rang out, and the flame in the lamp recovered instantly, returning their flickering shadows to normal. Feng Qianyi and Chen Xing turned in unison to look at the door.

“You shouldn’t be here.” Feng Qianyi’s voice carried an obvious tinge of anger. Chen Xing just stared at Feng Qianjun blankly.

“I have a good reason,” said Feng Qianjun, holding up a lamp. “Chen Xing, you need to come up with me, or the entire bank may be torn down. Go give them an explanation first!”

Bright lights shone throughout the Songbai Residence. More than a thousand warriors were ready for combat, wielding crossbows and swords for their confrontation. There were servants inside the residence, too, so the warriors were packed in like sardines, surrounding the gate in a watertight circle.

Xiang Shu was sitting on a stone with a plaque that had been folded in half and tossed beside him. The ring-pommel blade that he’d seized from Feng Qianjun lay horizontally across his knees, and next to him, a stick of incense was burning.

“Great Chanyu,” the Xifeng Bank’s sixty-year-old main teller said politely, “my Songbai Residence and the Ancient Chi Le Covenant have always minded their own business. With the enlightened Son of Heaven on the throne, Chang’an has Chang’an’s laws, so why do this? To rely on your martial prowess to commit such violence and smash my bank’s signboard like this… Even if we were all to be buried here today, what would that

accomplish? You would never be able to finish killing all the Han people in the world.”

Xiang Shu ignored him and cast a casual glance at the incense stick next to him. It was nearing its end, and the crowd of warriors actually took half a step back in retreat.

The teller’s expression was grave. He had seen too many wars and massacres in his time. Xiang Shu had barged into Xifeng Bank late at night, and when Feng Qianjun rushed over, his family’s precious blade was confiscated as soon as he met the Great Chanyu. The teller had also heard rumors that this man had barged into the imperial palace the previous night. If they offended him, everyone in the bank would likely die, and they had all braced themselves to meet their ends.

Fortunately, Feng Qianjun finally emerged with Chen Xing, and they quickly walked out of the main entrance.

Seeing the situation, Chen Xing finally snapped out of his daze and grew angry. “What are you doing? I just came to see Feng-xiong for something!”

Xiang Shu didn’t answer. Instead, in an apathetic fashion, he flung the Harmony Saber away. The blade shot toward Feng Qianjun with a clang, spinning round and round like a silver plate. Feng Qianjun reached out to grasp the handle of the saber, but Xiang Shu had thrown it with great force and it pierced a wooden pillar with a thud. Feng Qianjun had to tug at it twice before, with much difficulty, he finally yanked it out.

Feng Qianjun and Xiang Shu had been travelling companions for a short two months. He knew Xiang Shu was somewhat temperamental, but for Xiang Shu to give him no consideration at all and to strike at them directly in search of Chen Xing came as a surprise.

“Follow the Great Chanyu back to the palace for now,” Feng Qianjun told Chen Xing. “We’ll chat another time, I’ll pay you a visit. Guards! Prepare a carriage to send Chen-xiongdi back to the palace!”

Having found the person he wanted, Xiang Shu turned around to leave. Chen Xing chased after him. “Xiang Shu!” he exploded, standing in front of the Songbai Residence’s entrance. “What do you mean by this?!”

But Xiang Shu had already left on his horse.

The Feng family pulled up a carriage, and Chen Xing had to embark, profoundly discontented. He kicked the soft chair inside the carriage and then grumpily sat down.

Chapter 15

IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT, the carriage swayed back and forth as it crossed through the deserted main street. Chen Xing was still thinking about what Feng Qianyi had said, and his thoughts were a great, tangled mess. Yuwen Xin had directly caused his parents' deaths! But why?! He had studied under the Chen family! Had Chen Xing's father not treated him well enough?

Feng Qianyi's cold voice rang in his ears: "You're not so unmoved by hatred, are you?"

Chen Xing closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He dropped his head, pinching the space between his eyebrows and rubbing circles with his thumb and forefinger.

Xiang Shu spurred his horse along the main street. As he crossed Hanguang Gates Avenue, the rhythmic clang of the night watch sounding the hour faded into the distance, and a gust of wind began to blow.

Xiang Shu's head shot up, and he saw a faint, blurry shadow spring out of the trees and shrubs by the roadside and leap over a tall wall. Frowning, he immediately urged his horse to turn.

The warhorse turned around and rushed toward the carriage, which was making its way through the main street toward the Hanguang Gates. All Xiang Shu could see of the intruder was the shadow they cast on the wall. He shot toward the carriage, shouting, "Get out of the carriage!"

The coachman tried to get a closer look, but he didn't see the shadowy silhouette; he only saw Xiang Shu rushing him, sword in hand. Fearing that the horses would collide, he tumbled off the carriage and onto the roadside. In the blink of an eye, the silhouette had reached the carriage. The figure lifted a long, pitch-black saber in both hands, swinging it horizontally at the carriage and slicing it open.

That slash cut through the carriage like paper, cleaving straight through the middle and instantly separating the coachman's head from his body. The upper half of the carriage went flying and landed almost ten feet away—it looked like the person sitting inside the carriage was about to be sliced in half as well!

Chen Xing had slumped over, his head buried in his knees as he gave in to his sorrow. When a sudden gust of cold wind swept over his backside, he was confused. He sat up straight and looked all around him. When had this carriage turned into a handcart?

In a flash, Xiang Shu leaped off his horse and onto the carriage, flying past Chen Xing in the process. Chen Xing hadn't seen what had happened, so he thought that Xiang Shu had suddenly lost his mind and cut the carriage into two. His soul flew out of his body. "ARE YOU NUTS?!" he yelled.

Whoosh! The shadowy figure dashed back toward the wall. Xiang Shu lunged forward to stab at it, but the pitch-black shadow saber materialized once more to slice at him. Xiang Shu bent backward to dodge, and the tip of the blade missed his face by less than an inch, leaving a lingering chill in its wake.

Chen Xing hastily clambered out of the carriage. "Hurry and help!" shouted Xiang Shu.

"Help *how*?" Chen Xing stood on the road, mystified. From his perspective, Xiang Shu was just hacking randomly at a wall. "Great Chanyu? Are you all right? Did you…accidentally kick the shaft of the carriage?"

Xiang Shu was speechless.

As soon as Chen Xing extricated himself from the carriage, the shadow broke free from its brawl with Xiang Shu and whooshed to the ground, speeding toward Chen Xing instead. Xiang Shu turned around to give chase, shouting, "Light!"

This time, Chen Xing saw it. He activated the Heart Lamp, and a flash of bright light illuminated their surroundings. Wherever the light touched, shadows disappeared without a trace. The Heart Lamp's light

shone down on the corpse of the coachman lying on the roadside. Chen Xing couldn't believe it!

"What is this?!" Chen Xing took a fast step back.

"I should be the one asking you that," Xiang Shu said, cold as ice. Then he shouted, "Behind you! It's coming again!"

Chen Xing turned around. Xiang Shu lunged forward, shielding Chen Xing with his sword. "A yao!" Chen Xing exclaimed.

He called upon the Heart Lamp, and the weapon in Xiang Shu's hand began to glow. The shadow seemed to hesitate for a moment, but in the end, it raced back toward them, undeterred. Xiang Shu, however, was faster, and he stabbed the sword into the ground, piercing the shadow. A cloud of black fog erupted from it, and it shrank back and began to revolve on the spot, releasing bursts of cold, malevolent wind.

Xiang Shu stopped Chen Xing with one hand when he tried to scoot forward. Chen Xing peeked out from behind him, staring at the thing in horror. "Wh-wh-what kind of yao is that? What about the Silence of All Magic? Why are there yao in Chang'an?!"

They watched the shadow as it slowly retreated, apparently wary of Chen Xing. "Aren't you an exorcist?" Xiang Shu demanded. "Exorcize it!"

Chen Xing lit up the Heart Lamp several more times to expel that shadow, but it just darted around outside the range of the Heart Lamp's glow, remaining out of reach. "I don't know how to!" Chen Xing blurted out, feeling no shame at all. "I can only make myself glow, I don't know any other spells!"

This pissed Xiang Shu off so tremendously that his vision went dark for a moment. *If you don't know how to exorcize yao, fine! Just scare it away! Why did you say that out loud? Now the yao knows too!*

Sure enough, in the next moment, the shadow began to transform and elongate. It whipped into a whirlwind, and a figure clad from head to toe in heavy armor began to emerge from within.

Distantly, they heard the sound of hooves striking the ground—the city guards on patrol had arrived. Xiang Shu made a snap decision: He

grabbed Chen Xing's wrists and yanked him backward, and Chen Xing didn't even have time to think before Xiang Shu sent him flying through the air. With two swift steps, Xiang Shu leaped onto the wall at the side of the road, collided with Chen Xing, and grabbed him.

A monstrous warrior clad in pitch-black armor dashed out from within the whirlwind, lunging through the air to give chase. Just before its sword could stab Xiang Shu directly in the back, Chen Xing, scrambling in the chaos, raised his hand. With his left arm wrapped around Xiang Shu's waist and his right hand peeking out from the other side of his torso, he shot forth a flash of light from his palm.

In that instant, Chen Xing saw the yao's helmet. It looked familiar.

The black-armored warrior let out an angry bellow and fell off the wall, and Xiang Shu transitioned from snatching Chen Xing out of the air to hugging him firmly around the waist. Kicking off the high wall, he vaulted over another wall that enclosed a government official's residence, Chen Xing in tow. With another leap, he landed on the point of the residence's roof. He and Chen Xing turned sideways and went sliding down along the tiles.

They crossed over another wall and jumped back onto the rooftops, traversing two residences in a heartbeat. It was only then that Chen Xing realized: Xiang Shu was running away!

"We're going to run away, just like that?" he protested.

Xiang Shu was furious. "What else should we be doing?!"

Half-hugging Chen Xing like this, Xiang Shu was very close, and he had very strong lungs; his bellow almost made Chen Xing go deaf. Chen Xing tried to placate him. "That's not what I meant. That monster…"

Seeing Xiang Shu's dark expression, he trailed off.

In such a short span of time, they had left the main street behind. They weren't far from the palace now, and the high walls, nearly twenty feet tall, were no more than level ground to Xiang Shu. They found themselves in the garden less than half an hour later. When they finally landed, Chen Xing's head was spinning so much that he struggled to keep

upright. Before he could look back to see if the shadow was still chasing them, Xiang Shu grabbed Chen Xing by the arm and dragged him imperiously back to the sleeping chamber.

Six eunuchs were waiting in the hall to serve him. “Light all of the lamps,” Xiang Shu ordered. In the middle of the night, the sleeping chamber blazed with light. Xiang Shu waved his hand again, motioning for them all to leave.

Chen Xing’s nerves hadn’t yet settled. He sat down at the table, looking for some tea to drink. “That monster is a shad—”

But before he could finish speaking, Xiang Shu lifted Chen Xing by his lapels, spilling tea all over him. Chen Xing was taken aback. With a dangerous glint in his eyes, Xiang Shu lifted Chen Xing from his seat and pressed him up against a pillar. Chen Xing struggled to free himself, his face flushing red from the exertion.

“What were you doing in that place where those Han gather?!” Xiang Shu snarled. “And here I was actually believing your nonsense!”

Chen Xing continued to struggle, panicking. He clutched at Xiang Shu’s wrists with both hands, but Xiang Shu’s arms were so solid they could have been cast from iron; they didn’t budge an inch. Xiang Shu’s angry breaths fanned over Chen Xing’s face, and his entire body was emanating a murderous, almost maniacal intent. Chen Xing dangled in midair, his eyes level with Xiang Shu’s, and, finding himself at the end of his rope, he had no choice but to employ the malevolent “shifty kick” move of kneeing Xiang Shu in the crotch.

Not only did this move cause unspeakable harm to one’s opponent, it could easily enrage the opponent further. Unfortunately, Chen Xing had once again misjudged Xiang Shu’s strength. With nothing more than a gentle flick of his finger, Xiang Shu hit the yang ling quan acupoint below Chen Xing’s knee, instantly making half of Chen Xing’s body go tinglingly numb.

Chen Xing spent a long time gasping for breath before he managed to recover. He stared at Xiang Shu. “*I* am a Han,” he retorted, finally losing his own temper. “And what business is it of yours where I go?!”

“That group is plotting a rebellion! You were courting death!”

Chen Xing felt an icy chill come over him. How did Xiang Shu know that?

As he spoke, Xiang Shu drew his sword, lightning fast. Chen Xing was sitting on the floor, and he quickly shuffled backward, but it was too late—the point of Xiang Shu’s sword rested in the hollow of his throat.

“You’re not an exorcist!” Xiang Shu was looking down at him, his voice like ice. “You were lying. Now tell me the truth. If you lie to me one more time, that’ll be the end of your miserable life!”

Chen Xing couldn’t stop gasping for air, and on every inhale, he felt the freezing tip of the blade against his throat. He looked up at Xiang Shu, overcome by a miasma of emotions. Everything that had happened, the whole string of complicated events, flashed through his mind.

“If you don’t believe me, then just do it,” Chen Xing said stubbornly, swallowing his grief. “Go on! Kill me!”

Recalling what Feng Qianyi had said about his parents’ deaths and Yuwen Xin’s betrayal, Chen Xing couldn’t hold it in any longer: Tears streamed uncontrollably down his cheeks. Xiang Shu didn’t know what to say. He hadn’t expected Chen Xing to cry. He lifted his sword away a little and studied Chen Xing, baffled.

“I do want to rebel!” Chen Xing shouted. “I want to avenge my parents! You’re right! Everything I told you was a lie!”

“Shut up!” Xiang Shu yelled, concerned that Chen Xing’s voice would attract curious listeners. The walls had ears in the palace, and plotting a rebellion was a massive taboo even for the Great Chanyu.

Chen Xing calmed himself from his brief emotional outburst. His gaze, when he met Xiang Shu’s eyes, was unperturbed.

Xiang Shu finally accepted what Chen Xing had told him, but when he thought it through, new questions emerged. “Who sent you here? Aren’t you afraid that your whole family will be executed?”

Chen Xing wiped his tears away. “I’m the one who wanted to come. Why would I be afraid of my family being executed? My entire family’s already dead!”

Xiang Shu was stunned to hear this. He sheathed his sword and took a step forward, looking at Chen Xing with a gaze that suddenly bore a hint of sympathy. He reached out, wanting to pull Chen Xing up. But as soon as he moved, Chen Xing backed away, afraid that Xiang Shu would hit him again.

They looked at each other for a moment. Chen Xing didn’t say anything. He just warily ducked away, slowly crawled into his bed, and lay down with his back to Xiang Shu.

With a stony expression, Xiang Shu changed on his own and sat down on the main bed. From time to time, he glanced over at Chen Xing.

“Will the assassin come back?” Chen Xing asked, still facing the wall.

“That’s a question for you.”

“Is the coachman dead?”

“What do you think?” Xiang Shu grouched. Chen Xing fell silent.

Why was it that on their way back to the palace, they had encountered such an attack? Who—or what—was the assassin? And that black iron helmet… Chen Xing was sure he had seen it somewhere before. Then there was the fact that even Xiang Shu knew about the Feng family’s secret rebellion plot.

Chen Xing’s head hurt so badly he couldn’t stand it. “What should we do if the lights go out later?” he asked muzzily.

For once, Xiang Shu responded to him in full. “This is my territory,” he said. “If it dares to chase us all the way here, I’ll kill it.”

Chen Xing was so tired that he didn’t even know when he fell asleep. He dreamed that a great yao lived in Xiang Shu’s body. From out of the main street, which was blanketed in darkness, Xiang Shu stepped bravely forward and picked Chen Xing up. But as they were leaping across roofs and vaulting over walls, the huge yao within Xiang Shu’s body emerged and snared the two of them with its innumerable, pitch-black tentacles. Chen Xing struggled, but the tentacles wrapped around his throat.

When his eyes shot open, he found that the rest of the night had passed uneventfully. The sun had long since risen, and the hall beyond the screen was filled with seated young men around the ages of sixteen or seventeen.

Xiang Shu, dressed in just his sleeping clothes, stood before a mirror as a eunuch helped him into a Hu outfit. He turned and stepped out past the screen, and all the young men addressed him meekly.

“Great Chanyu.”

“Great Chanyu…”

Great Chanyu, Great Chanyu, Great Chanyu…

Chen Xing got up, still bleary-eyed. He put on his clothes and stared stonily at Xiang Shu, who was eating breakfast in the hall, surrounded by beautiful young men. Yuwen Xin was there too, sitting quite far back in the hall and staring enviously at the young Xianbei man who was pouring Xiang Shu a cup of tea.

Xiang Shu glanced at Chen Xing, but Chen Xing turned away, ignoring him. That turn of his head, however, made him conscious of the fact that everyone in the hall was looking at him.

There was a note on the table with Chen Xing’s name written on it, and Chen Xing opened it up to take a look. The handwriting inside was both bold and powerful—Fu Jian’s handwriting. The emperor himself was in the mood to invite Chen Xing for a chat in Taixing Palace that morning.

“Does the Great Chanyu wish to take a stroll through Chang’an City today?” a young man asked.

Xiang Shu didn’t say anything. He finished his breakfast and started drinking his tea.

Another young man suggested, “Or we could go to the hunting grounds?”

“Yes, yes,” everyone agreed at once.

“I’ve heard that the Great Chanyu is unrivaled in archery and horseback riding,” said Yuwen Xin. “It would be a great pleasure to catch a glimpse of those legendary skills.”

Xiang Shu seemed to be considering this suggestion, and the young man who had taken the initiative to serve him moved a little closer. He

smiled, moving to whisper something to Xiang Shu. Xiang Shu was about to push his head away when Chen Xing suddenly looked up.

“Great Chanyu,” Chen Xing said. “His Majesty has summoned me. I need to take a trip to the palace later.”

Xiang Shu didn’t push the young man aside after all. The young man, who had been interrupted mid-sentence, glared daggers at Chen Xing as he emerged from behind the screen.

From the young men’s expressions alone, Chen Xing could imagine what they were thinking: *Who is this guy? Why is he staying in the Great Chanyu’s room? Did they spend the night together?*

The corners of his mouth twitched. *I have no intention of snatching away your Great Chanyu. If you like that rabid dog, then by all means, carry on liking him. It’s none of my business.*

He stuffed the letter into his pocket and, without waiting for Xiang Shu’s response, left Taixing Palace to have an audience with the emperor. On his way out, he glanced at Yuwen Xin, feeling conflicted. Yuwen Xin didn’t notice at all; he was too focused on plastering on that warm, genial smile for Xiang Shu’s sake.

Chen Xing quashed the urge to stop in front of Yuwen Xin and punch him in the face. If he did something like that now, he would have to suffer the consequences, and from the looks of it, Xiang Shu wouldn’t be able to protect him, either. And he hadn’t thoroughly investigated the matter yet, anyway. What if it was all just a lie that Feng Qianyi had fabricated to lure him into joining the rebellion?

His parents had already been dead for so long, and there would always be a chance to uncover the truth. It didn’t need to happen right at this moment.

But what if Feng Qianyi was telling the truth?

They were gone. What purpose would vengeance serve? Even killing Yuwen Xin wouldn’t bring his parents and grandmother back to life…

Chen Xing sighed, his mind weighed down with thoughts as his feet brought him through the imperial gardens. The human world was too

complex. His shifu had said once that the desires of the human heart could be eviler than a yao's, and Chen Xing was beginning to see the truth behind that statement.

Taixing Palace, which housed Fu Jian's imperial study, was situated within the imperial gardens. Spring had arrived, the grass had grown tall, and orioles flitted about, clustered around a small, elegant building. Chen Xing's surroundings were vast and expansive, and the spring breeze was fresh, making the scene before him seem like the play of light and shadows across a screen. When Chen Xing arrived outside the imperial study, he found Tuoba Yan himself standing guard for Fu Jian.

"I'll look for you after my shift is over," Tuoba Yan whispered. Chen Xing was about to exchange some pleasantries with him, but Tuoba Yan gestured for him to head in.

When he stepped inside, Chen Xing found himself in a room lined on three sides by towering bookshelves. Bamboo strip rolls, books, and scrolls were everywhere, each classified according to type and subject matter, and they were cataloged with the stems-and-branches system.[29] Fu Jian sat, imposing, on a couch in the middle of the room. Behind him hung two banners, one to his right and one to his left; one was embroidered with a white tiger, while the other was embroidered with a zouyu.[30]

Hold on, are those magical artifacts from the Jin Dynasty? Chen Xing narrowed his eyes, thinking back. The ancient texts he read did have records of a White Tiger Banner and a Zouyu Banner. The white tiger roused armies and the zouyu calmed them. Such amazing magical artifacts were in Fu Jian's hands!

It was a pity that after the Silence of All Magic, the two banners were no longer of any use. Regardless, Chen Xing needed to find a chance to get them away from Fu Jian. Who knew what might happen in the future?

Fu Jian was speaking to an elegant, learned scholar at his side. He sat before a neat row of twenty-four low tables, where princes and ministers might sit to discuss politics or answer the emperor's inquiries.

"You've come at just the right time," Fu Jian said, noticing Chen Xing and beckoning for him to sit. "Come here and let Ziye take a look at

you.”

Chen Xing approached and was about to kowtow when Fu Jian stopped him. “No need to kowtow. Scholars have always been exempted from kowtowing to Us.”

Although Fu Jian was trying to be amicable, he still conveyed an unquestionable air of authority. This behavior stood in stark contrast to the way he’d spoken to Xiang Shu the other night. Chen Xing could tell that while Fu Jian was doing his best to feign familiarity with “scholars,” the familiarity he had shown Xiang Shu was the real deal.

The scholar, Ziye, smiled at him. “Whatever the emperor says goes. Since he said that you need not kowtow, you may feel free to be impudent.”

Chen Xing chuckled at that. “This is Wang Ziye, Our Palace Assistant Secretary,” Fu Jian said.

A Palace Assistant Secretary, while only a proper third-class rank, was an official who was in charge of inspecting all the other officials and examining all the petitions to the throne regarding state affairs. That meant Wang Ziye reported directly to Fu Jian, which was equivalent to being Fu Jian’s personal secretary. Any recommendations for personnel or anything regarding the imperial examinations required final approval from the officials who worked for Wang Ziye, so he held a great deal of power.

Chen Xing addressed him as Lord Wang, and Wang Ziye smiled in response. He studied Chen Xing and asked about his family, as if trying to ascertain whether Chen Xing’s identity was a fabrication.

“I didn’t expect Chen-xiansheng to still have a living descendant,” he said. “This is great. This is really great!”

Chen Xing politely answered each of his questions, but he was unable to shake the feeling that there was something a little strange about Wang Ziye. It was the first time since Chen Xing had left the mountain that he’d felt so restless in front of a stranger. Wang Ziye’s eyes seemed to see through everything.

Don’t tell me that Fu Jian wants me to become an official after a single meeting, Chen Xing thought. *And how is it that everyone is so well-*

informed around here?

Aside from Xiang Shu, Yuwen Xin should have been the only one who knew about Chen Xing's background. He hadn't expected that information to spread like wildfire in Weiyang Palace. Within a day, the Feng family had managed to catch wind of it, and now even Fu Jian was aware. He had to assume that there were a lot more people discussing it behind his back as well.

Chapter 16

WHILE CHEN XING contemplated how to politely decline, Wang Ziye kept talking. “The calamity that befell the Chen family was truly undeserved. Back then, the war in Jinyang caused immense suffering, and it claimed far too many lives.”

Fu Jian sighed. “It was Our fault,” he said to Chen Xing.

Chen Xing understood then: Fu Jian intended to apologize to him. But what use was an apology when his parents and family were gone? He thought about it for a moment, then said, “The dead can’t come back to life. I’ve been studying in seclusion over the years, and I’ve long since moved past it.”

Fu Jian nodded, and for a moment, the study was silent. Finally, Wang Ziye stood to take his leave.

“I’ll go review the list of names for the spring selection,” Wang Ziye said. “Forty-eight Confucian scholars from across the country have been recommended for the imperial examination.”

Fu Jian got up. “I won’t see you out, then. I can take this opportunity to reminisce about old times with this young friend here.”

Gaining the emperor’s favor was the ultimate wish of all civil and martial officials, but Chen Xing didn’t feel particularly flattered. He hadn’t come to Chang’an to seek a position for himself, and he wasn’t afraid of offending Fu Jian. Furthermore, the boundary between the Hu and Han peoples meant they could never truly become close.

When Wang Ziye turned away, Fu Jian gave Chen Xing a meaningful glance. Chen Xing took the initiative to ask, “Why is His Majesty looking for me?”

The events of the previous night still weighed heavily on him. He needed some time to rethink everything. His lead on the Exorcism Department’s headquarters had been cut off, and he had parted with the Feng brothers on bad terms. And who was the assassin who had pursued

him afterward? Had the yao been sent by the Feng family to silence him, or by the same secret puppeteers behind the drought fiends?

“First and foremost, I want to thank you for saving our Great Chanyu,” Fu Jian said, sounding earnest. Chen Xing quickly demurred, insisting he didn’t deserve the praise and had merely acted in passing.

Fu Jian then asked Chen Xing why he had traveled all the way to Xiangyang City, but after the events of the previous night and with his enemies lurking in the shadows, Chen Xing had a sense that he had been exposed. He had to tread carefully, and even more so now that Yuwen Xin had disclosed Chen Xing’s identity both within and without the palace.

He explained to Fu Jian that he had been passing through Xiangyang when he was unexpectedly trapped and found himself unable to leave. Fu Jian wasn’t the sort of person who would insist on probing too deeply, and judging by his expression, he readily believed what Chen Xing told him. Fu Jian asked Chen Xing about his reading habits and whether he could write essays.

Chen Xing replied honestly, “I studied medicine for a few years, but I’m ashamed to admit that I can only treat people. I haven’t focused much on governance or writing essays.”

Fu Jian gave him a meaningful smile. “A few days ago, I couldn’t resist the urge to spar with the Great Chanyu, but I’m getting old, and my shoulders are stiff now. Perhaps you could perform some acupuncture on me?”

Chen Xing was a little taken aback. Without waiting for Fu Jian’s orders, a palace attendant delivered some needles and stones. Chen Xing considered them briefly; then he nodded and smiled. “All right.”

Fu Jian removed his imperial robe, revealing his muscular, bare back, and lay face down on the couch in front of the table. Chen Xing sat next to him, took a silver needle, and heated it over a flame. Then he began administering acupuncture treatment.

In addition to “Emperor Qin,” “Divine King,” and “Lord of the North,” Fu Jian held another prestigious title: the Number One Martial Artist of the Great Qin Dynasty. Rumor had it that north of the Huai River,

Fu Jian was foremost among all martial artists, and that most who faced him met their demise. Still, Chen Xing harbored no doubt that Xiang Shu possessed the strength to defeat Fu Jian, because he noticed a small bruise near Fu Jian's heart—a clear sign of a wound from a scabbard strike. Had the strike come from a blade, it would have been fatal.

Fu Jian probably can't beat Xiang Shu, Chen Xing thought. Xiang Shu's greatest strength lay in his incredible speed, and among all the many martial arts skills, speed was the most important. No matter how brave and fierce Fu Jian was, he probably couldn't defend against Xiang Shu's lightning-fast attacks.

"When We first met you that night," Fu Jian said, lounging insouciantly, "We knew you couldn't possibly be Shulü Kong's servant. You're a scholar. You have the demeanor of one, too; you're just like them."

Chen Xing smiled. "I'm really not like them. Your Majesty has misjudged me."

His words were sincere, not modest. After escaping from Jinyang, he went against his family tradition and diverged from the path of an ordinary Confucian scholar, which included diligent study of the Four Books and Five Classics or delving into governance as written by Dong Zhongshu and other ancient sages. Instead, Chen Xing's interests lay in supernatural tales, folklore, local customs, astronomy, geography, and other subjects that tended to be categorized as "miscellaneous studies"—areas typically looked down upon by traditional Confucian scholars. He viewed the Hundred Schools of Thought as primarily useful for advising rulers, so he hadn't delved deeply into those teachings.

In fact, the teachings of Confucius and Mencius were antithetical to exorcists. As the saying went, "Confucius does not discuss the strange, the powerful, chaos, or spirits." Another Confucian saying even went, "If one cannot manage human affairs, how can one manage those of spirits?" Confucian scholars strongly opposed the "fantasy world" familiar to exorcists and advocated for a focus on the "present world."

"You remind Us of someone," Fu Jian said slowly, his eyes closed. "A Han."

Chen Xing held a needle and inserted it into the lower third region of the back of Fu Jian's neck. If, in that moment, he had stabbed the fengfu acupoint at the back of Fu Jian's head with the needle, pushing it in three inches, Fu Jian would have immediately met his end. Chen Xing didn't understand why a ruler of such eminence would dare to entrust his life to another. With just one thrust of his needle, he could have fulfilled Feng Qianyi's long-burning lust for revenge.

However, while Chen Xing was under Sui Xing's protection, Fu Jian had the Emperor Star's guardianship. If he were to stab Fu Jian and the Emperor Star clashed with Sui Xing, the outcome would be uncertain.

"Did you ever meet my father?" Chen Xing asked.

"No," Fu Jian replied, his eyes still closed. "We only know of his great reputation. The one We are thinking of is named Wang Meng. He passed away a year ago."

A few years prior, Wang Meng had been the chief strategist of Fu Jian's government. He aided Fu Jian in defeating his archenemy, Heng Wen, established a system where the Qin and Jin dynasties governed distinct territories, and devised a plan to overthrow Fu Sheng, the ruthless and bloodthirsty previous emperor. Numerous edicts were issued during the Qin Dynasty to elevate the status of the Han people, and Wang Meng had frequently reminded Fu Jian that the strength of the Han was critical to setting down a robust foundation for future generations. Relying solely on the Di tribe and those beyond the pass would lead to their demise within a century.

When Wang Meng was alive, the Great Qin was like a swift carriage that swept away the declined and tarnished reputation of the Jin Dynasty. With each war, the Great Qin's bravery increased, and it remained undefeated for over a decade, transforming Fu Jian into a rarely seen God of War. Consequently, the Qin Dynasty became the most vibrant nation in the world.

Fu Jian often likened Wang Meng to the famed strategist Zhuge Liang, and he considered him his closest confidant. Wang Meng's death at

the age of fifty had come as a heavy blow. Fu Jian's temples turned frosty white, and it took more than a year for him to gradually overcome the loss.

Chen Xing made a sound of acknowledgment, but his mind was elsewhere.

"Wang Ziye, whom you just met," Fu Jian said, "is one of Wang Meng's distant younger cousins."

"Oh?" Chen Xing inserted another needle. He had already placed more than ten needles into Fu Jian's back.

"You don't resemble Jinglüe at all," Fu Jian murmured, as if to himself, "but for some reason, We started thinking about him as soon as We saw you…"

"Perhaps," Chen Xing said with a smile as he finished his acupuncture treatment, "it's because Wang Meng is my shixiong. We studied under the same shifu."

Fu Jian burst into hearty laughter. "So that's why, so that's why!" he said, expressing no doubt about the veracity of Chen Xing's words.

"I only met Shixiong twice, and we didn't speak much either time. The first occasion was in the fifth year after the state was established…"

"Yes. That year, before Jinglüe helped me defeat Heng Wen, he returned to Mount Hua once."

Chen Xing murmured acknowledgment. "And the other time was in the sixth year after the state was founded."

"Jinglüe and I bade farewell at Bashang, launched an attack on the Xianbei Murong clan, and defeated the enemy," Fu Jian recalled.

These were the only two occasions on which Chen Xing had the opportunity to meet his eldest shixiong, Wang Meng. When Wang Meng was confronted with the arrival of the Divine Land's Mandate of Heaven, he struggled to devise a strategy, so he'd returned to Mount Hua to seek guidance from their shifu. In Chen Xing's recollection, his dashixiong had been a cheerful and generous person who treated him kindly. Chen Xing had been young then, however, so he couldn't remember much, only fragments of the conversations between his shixiong and shifu.

“Your Majesty, please don’t move,” Chen Xing said as he pressed down on Fu Jian’s back. “I still have a few needles to insert.”

Fu Jian grew pensive. “Fellow disciples, We see. It’s a true pity that your shifu has passed away. So, do you have a betrothal yet with Our Great Chanyu? You two are well-matched, after all.”

Chen Xing fell silent.

“G-gentler,” Fu Jian urged.

“Your Majesty,” Chen Xing said in a threatening voice, moving closer, “I am not…familiar…with…him. We aren’t even friends!”

Why did everyone think he had some kind of unspeakable relationship with Xiang Shu?! Chen Xing thoroughly lost his temper. Was it because Xiang Shu had brought him to the palace? Now that he thought about it, though, he *was* Xiang Shu’s savior, and Xiang Shu had brought him all the way to Chang’an from a thousand miles away. Perhaps it was natural that Fu Jian would misunderstand their relationship at the start…

“Ah, if you’re not, you’re not,” said Fu Jian. “Don’t be rash.”

Chen Xing finished inserting the last two needles. “It’s done, Your Majesty. Please don’t move.”

“Since you’re Jinglüe’s little shidi, you must have left your shifu and come to Chang’an to settle down, right? What do you think of the Great Qin?”

Chen Xing efficiently packed up his things and sat down to the side. “I’m just passing through. I’ll have to leave soon.”

Fu Jian seemed surprised. “Where do you want to go?”

Chen Xing shrugged and smiled. “I don’t know.”

Fu Jian lay sprawled, turning his head slightly sideways. “Do you have an arrangement with Shulü Kong?”

“I have nothing to do with him, Your Majesty.”

“Okay, okay, let’s not talk about that for now,” Fu Jian said hastily, wary of Chen Xing attacking him again. He paused briefly. “Chen Tianchi,

what are your thoughts on Princess Qinghe's cousin, Our Regular Mounted Attendant, the young man named Tuoba Yan?"

Outside the study, Tuoba Yan coughed awkwardly. Chen Xing remained silent for a moment, then said sincerely, "Your Majesty, as the emperor, you have many important matters to attend to every day. Why would you idle away your time playing matchmaker for me? And with a man, too?"

"The Great Chanyu and young Tuoba are both dear brothers to Us. Is there some problem with Us discussing marriage matters on behalf of Our brothers?"

Chen Xing quickly changed his tune. "There's no problem! But even if you do want to act as a matchmaker, shouldn't you look for a woman?"

Fu Jian laughed again. "When autumn arrives this year, We will issue a new decree: All men in the world can marry each other, so they need not be bound by constraints of propriety any longer."

"So I've heard," Chen Xing replied with disinterest. "But I—"

Fu Jian cut him off with a gesture. "Don't judge Tuoba Yan by his unassuming demeanor; he is wise and astute, though he appears simple-minded. As a young man, he may be careless in minor matters, but he has never been negligent in important ones. If you were willing to become his bride, it would be a good and beautiful match. Why not stay at court to serve Us? You and Yan-er, one adept in literary arts and the other in martial arts, in a union personally approved by Us, would…"

Chen Xing hesitated. "I…"

He felt a fleeting urge to slap Fu Jian while the needles had him immobilized, but he quickly dismissed it. After all, any commoner would feel lucky to have the emperor choose their marriage partner, especially if that partner were the most favored commander of the three armies, a rank four military officer, young, talented, and handsome…

Regardless of the prestige his family once commanded, Chen Xing was, by this point, nothing more than a commoner. And even the children of

officials would shed tears of gratitude to be granted such an opportunity by Fu Jian. What reason could anyone possibly have to refuse him?

Chen Xing took a deep breath and smiled. “We’re both men…”

“Exactly! So why act bashful? What we need is a straightforward answer. In our Di people’s homeland—”

“What I mean is, we’re all men, so we shouldn’t be using the word ‘bride’ while discussing marriage!” Chen Xing was on the verge of flipping a table. “And if someone has to be the bride, why not him?”

Though Chen Xing had interrupted him, Fu Xian showed no signs of anger. “If you’re willing to join Our court as an official, assist Us in unifying and ruling the world, and show Us what you’re capable of, then when you reach a position of rank three or higher, We will appoint Tuoba Yan as your wife. What’s the issue with that?”

“No, no, no, that’s not what I meant,” Chen Xing protested.

“Then why don’t you ask Yan-er if he’s willing to—”

“No!” Chen Xing interrupted urgently. He had heard Tuoba Yan, who was guarding the study outside, clear his throat again. “Wait! Your Majesty!”

If Tuoba Yan were to actually agree, then the king’s words would have to be taken seriously. Once said, they couldn’t be unsaid, and there would be no turning back.

“To tell you the truth,” Chen Xing said, “it’s not about who should be whose wife, Your Majesty, there’s something—”

Tuoba Yan’s voice interrupted them from outside. “The Great Chanyu has arrived.”

Chen Xing had meant to tell Fu Jian outright: *All this matchmaking and trying to hitch me to Tuoba Yan is pointless. I won’t live past twenty anyway, and I’m very busy.* However, Xiang Shu’s arrival brought their conversation to an abrupt halt.

Xiang Shu walked straight into the imperial study without waiting for Fu Jian’s permission. Frowning slightly, he found a place to sit.

With a glance, Chen Xing noticed that he was dressed in black martial robes and black boots. There was no embroidery or decorative embellishment on his attire aside from a brass knuckle forged from black iron on his right hand. His simple outfit highlighted the fairness of his skin, giving him the appearance of a robust and upright poplar tree, tall and straight, radiating a commanding presence that outshone everyone around him.

Plenty of people want to marry the Great Chanyu, Chen Xing thought. *If you're bored, you should help them arrange their marriages. Marry all sixteen of those young men who were in the hall this morning to Xiang Shu. I'd like to see how he handles it.*

"Shulü Kong?" Fu Jian said. "We heard you've arranged sixteen marriages with families from Chang'an's Xianbei, Xiongnu, and Qiang tribes?"

Chen Xing kept silent. Xiang Shu didn't respond, just sat down to the side.

"You're of marriageable age now," Fu Jian added, "but can you handle marrying sixteen at once? Try not to indulge too much in your youth and vitality. If you go round after round each night and contract a disease, or…" He studied Xiang Shu with a skeptical look. "Do you have some sort of preference?"

Chen Xing barely restrained himself from bursting into laughter. Xiang Shu, however, said in a deep voice, "Cut the crap, Jiantou, you're probably the one who can't do it anymore. That's why you sent that Murong fellow so far away, right?"

"We'll show you what We are capable of right now!" Fu Jian retorted angrily. He draped a casual arm around Chen Xing's shoulders. Chen Xing was lost, not yet understanding the meaning behind their words, but he sensed a dangerous aura emanating from Xiang Shu.

Fu Jian laughed like it was nothing and let go of Chen Xing, then said to Xiang Shu, "Or do you plan to try it yourself?"

"Screw you!" Xiang Shu spat, suppressing his murderous intent.

A sudden silence fell in the study. After a moment, Chen Xing broke it. “It’s time to take the needles out, Your Majesty.”

Fu Jian motioned for him to go ahead and remove them. “I heard,” he said to Xiang Shu, “that a Han man died on Tongren Street last night, in the northwest side of the city. A coachman who was driving a carriage.”

Chen Xing’s heart jolted. He wouldn’t have expected Fu Jian to pay any attention to such a trivial affair. Then again, he supposed, if an ordinary person had died violently on the streets, the government would have already intervened. The government didn’t dare investigate anything to do with the Great Chanyu, though; all they could do was report it to the palace.

His mind raced. He wondered how Xiang Shu would justify it.

“I killed him,” said Xiang Shu dispassionately. “So what?”

“Why would you kill an unarmed Han man?” Fu Jian asked. “That’s not like you.”

Chen Xing felt conflicted about this, but Xiang Shu replied, “Because I’m a rabid dog that kills anyone it sees.”

Chen Xing didn’t say a word. Fu Jian knew that wasn’t the truth, of course; Xiang Shu had only said it to shut him up.

“This is Chang’an, not the lands beyond the Great Wall,” Fu Jian said, his tone growing stern. “Once we pass through the gates, we must adhere to the local laws and regulations. It took Us a great deal of effort to bring the Five Tribes beyond the Great Wall to heel and persuade them not to kill the Han. Your actions have undermined the order and discipline of Our court and slighted Our imperial decree. Shulü Kong, do not embarrass Us in this way again.”

“It…it’s not like that.” Chen Xing wanted to explain, but when he glanced at Xiang Shu, he saw him shake his head gently. Chen Xing swallowed his words.

Fu Jian turned to Chen Xing. “Chen Tianchi, what do you think of Chang’an under Our governance?”

“It’s governed well,” Chen Xing said after a moment’s pause. It was the truth. “Prosperity and peace abound. Chang’an truly deserves its

position as the capital.” Chang’an was nothing like what Chen Xing had envisioned before he arrived. He hadn’t expected the capital to be so prosperous, a place where the Hu and Han coexisted peacefully.

“When they lived beyond the Great Wall, there were no laws and regulations,” Fu Jian said. “Even when laws were established, most did not abide by them. It was too difficult to make them understand the price they would have to pay for taking another’s life. We want everyone in the world to be able to eat their fill and dress warmly. When the Great Dao prevails, the world will be shared by all; the elderly cared for, the strong employed, the young nurtured. Punishment will be tempered with mercy, and consistent rules will guide the people. Shulü Kong.”

Chen Xing finished removing the needles and carefully put them away. Fu Jian stretched his shoulders, already feeling like his usual self again, and nodded with satisfaction.

“Think carefully,” he continued. “This isn’t like before, when we were beyond the Great Wall.”

Growing impatient with the conversation, Xiang Shu abruptly stood up and glanced at Chen Xing. Chen Xing sensed that he had something to say, so he stood as well and took the opportunity to bid farewell to Fu Jian.

However, Fu Jian still had something to say. “You still haven’t given Us an answer about the matter we discussed earlier, Chen Tianchi. There aren’t many who would dare to use delay tactics against Us.”

Chen Xing was surprised that he’d remembered. He glanced at Xiang Shu, only to find that Xiang Shu had left, unwilling to listen to their conversation.

He looked back at Fu Jian and, after a moment’s hesitation, said, “Your Majesty, shouldn’t marriage involve feelings? Even if you were to arrange for two people to marry, without genuine affection, they likely wouldn’t find happiness. I… You have so many other important matters to attend to; please don’t worry about this anymore.”

Fu Jian was taken aback, and he burst into laughter. “Feelings can be cultivated, even if they’re not initially present,” he said. “What an interesting answer. Very well, go on.”

Relief swept over Chen Xing as if he had been granted an amnesty, and he beat a hasty retreat. Suddenly, he remembered Tuoba Yan and began to feel awkward, but a glance around told him that Tuoba Yan was no longer at the door. Only Xiang Shu was waiting for him.

Chen Xing was following Xiang Shu out, his heart heavy, when suddenly, Xiang Shu turned around. Chen Xing jumped back, still on guard from how Xiang Shu had hit him before, and watched him vigilantly, ready to flee at any moment.

Seeing Chen Xing's guarded reaction, Xiang Shu didn't approach further. "I've thought it through," he said. "You didn't lie to me; you are indeed an exorcist. That day on Longzhong Mountain, you used mana."

You've had your fill of hitting and scolding me, and now that you've snapped out of it, you're here to apologize? Do you think an apology erases everything?

"Oh," said Chen Xing. "So what?"

"But you shouldn't have gone to the Songbai Residence last night," Xiang Shu continued icily. "Jiantou has known about their secret plot for a long time. He's just waiting to gather enough evidence before he takes action, to avoid unnecessary bloodshed."

So Fu Jian knew of the Feng family's plot to assassinate him and was just biding his time. On one hand, Fu Jian had always been confident in his own power, viewing rebels as little more than clowns. On the other hand, since the rebels had not yet taken action, he wanted to avoid being seen by the Han as a tyrant who slaughtered people unjustly. He needed at least some charges to justify executing the entire family.

"How could I have known?" Chen Xing retorted. "I was only searching for the ruins of the Exorcist Headquarters. I had no idea I'd find them hiding out in the Songbai Residence, discussing something like that."

Xiang Shu glanced around and, finding their surroundings empty, sat down in the corridor, hugging one knee to his chest. He seemed to be deep in thought. Chen Xing hated Xiang Shu to the core of his being, but seeing him like this softened his feelings. The early spring sunshine cast a gentle glow over him, highlighting his striking appearance—a true treat for the

eyes. Even dressed in the attire of an assassin, he was dangerous but magnetic.

Chen Xing was forced to vent his frustration on a tree in the garden. He snapped off a branch and whipped the bushes a few times, imagining they were Xiang Shu. “In the end,” he said, “they wanted me to help them kill Fu—uh, to kill that person, and I refused. If I intended to act, I would have done it today. Why would I wait for you to come find me?”

He surmised that after waiting for Chen Xing for a while and not seeing him return, Xiang Shu must have been concerned that something had happened and rushed over to check on him. Reflecting on it, Xiang Shu’s behavior toward him was peculiar. He’d assault Chen Xing on one occasion, then show concern for his safety on another. This was evident last night as well; if Xiang Shu hadn’t been worried about Chen Xing encountering danger, he would never have ventured so recklessly into the Songbai Residence.

Chen Xing recounted the events of the previous day, watching Xiang Shu’s expression as he spoke. Xiang Shu would doubtless be tight-lipped about this, and he wasn’t particularly talkative to begin with. For some reason, Chen Xing always felt comfortable sharing what he knew with Xiang Shu.

“Is there a lead on the person who tried to kill you?” Xiang Shu asked, when Chen Xing had finished.

“No. Could they have been sent by the Feng family?”

“Impossible.”

“Why? Once they realized they couldn’t persuade me, they might have decided to silence me.”

“Because the Feng family knows that I took you away, so they wouldn’t have acted that night. They’d know it would only cause trouble for them.”

“Then who could it be?” Chen Xing mused. Upon careful consideration, he realized it couldn’t be Feng Qianyi after all, because the shadow assassin was obviously some kind of yao. Feng Qianyi couldn’t

activate his family’s heirloom saber, so there was no way he would have had the ability to control such a yao.

Chen Xing and Xiang Shu exchanged glances, communicating as if the power of the Heart Lamp allowed them to understand each other’s thoughts. The only possibility was…

The mysterious group that had already targeted them.

“They’re in Chang’an City?” Chen Xing murmured.

“Isn’t that obvious?” said Xiang Shu. “You were too rash!”

Chen Xing shrugged. “Look, before I descended the mountain, I had no idea there would be a group of people scheming in the shadows to do all this, or that they’d want to conquer the Divine Land. And it’s not like you tried to stop me when I mentioned I was an exorcist, Lord Protector.”

“I’m not a protector,” Xiang Shu said disdainfully. “I just want to uncover the truth.”

“Okay, then let’s take a step back. What’s the use of acting like Zhuge Liang in hindsight? You…” Chen Xing scrutinized Xiang Shu and, curious, finally asked, “Why is it so important to you to uncover the secret of the drought fiends?”

Xiang Shu responded with silence.

Chapter 17

"THIS IS A FATED ARRANGEMENT," Chen Xing said. "It's not up to you whether you want to be a protector or not. See? This strange combination of circumstances dictates that you're destined to investigate this matter with me. Y-y-you… What are you trying to do? Are you trying to hit me again?!"

The moment Xiang Shu stood up, Chen Xing backed away, thinking about how even rabbits would bite when they felt threatened—yet Xiang Shu didn't threaten him at all. He merely walked up to Chen Xing and cast a sidelong look at him.

"I hate being deceived more than anything," Xiang Shu breathed. "Do not deceive me, and you will be able to keep your life."

When he heard Xiang Shu's imperious tone, a serious problem occurred to Chen Xing, one that he had overlooked: Xiang Shu was the Great Chanyu, which meant that he was the king beyond the Great Wall and, theoretically, on equal footing with the Central Plains' overlord, Fu Jian. Perhaps it was just habit, formed while they were on the move, but Chen Xing had never treated Xiang Shu as the Great Chanyu. He didn't watch his words in front of him the way he did with Fu Jian.

Now that he thought about it, this guy *was* a man of his word. However, that didn't stop Chen Xing from trying to gain an advantage using words.

"If you hit me again," he said bitterly, "once I get my mana back, I will take revenge and kill you!" As he spoke, he backed up a little. If Xiang Shu tried to hit him, he decided, he'd start yelling and run back to the imperial study to beg Fu Jian for help.

"I'll wait," was Xiang Shu's only reply. He waited for Chen Xing to catch up, frowning. "You're still not coming?"

Chen Xing felt doubtful for a moment, but then he snapped out of it. Xiang Shu wanted to investigate the matter related to the Exorcism

Department. He would follow along but maintain a certain distance.

Xiang Shu turned out of the garden and arrived in front of a palace hall. The guards by the door announced to the person inside, “The Great Chanyu has arrived.”

It was Princess Qinghe’s sleeping chamber. Inside, Princess Qinghe was seated in an indolent manner, with several reserved, elegant Xianbei girls at her side—likely the daughters of aristocratic Xianbei families. When they saw Xiang Shu, the girls laughed and stood up to greet him.

“Great Chanyu!”

“Don’t go harboring any hopes, now,” Princess Qinghe told them, smiling enigmatically. “All of you, sit down. The Great Chanyu likes men.”

Xiang Shu didn’t respond to that statement. Chen Xing cast a skeptical glance at him. “Oh, really? Is that true?”

“Has no one heard about the marriage proposals the other day?” Princess Qinghe asked the girls on either side of her.

Xiang Shu took a deep breath. Getting into this with Princess Qinghe would only make matters worse. “Where is he?” he asked.

“I’ve already called him over,” Princess Qinghe said. “Great Chanyu, sit down and drink some tea. Tianchi, serve your Great Chanyu for a while.” Chen Xing had no choice but to comply. “Tianchi?”

“Yes?” Chen Xing asked. He had the strong sense that this gang of Hu people liked to joke around and that they would tease him just because they had nothing better to do. He was wary of Princess Qinghe, and he didn’t know if Xiang Shu had come to ask her for help finding someone or to assist in their investigation.

Smiling, Princess Qinghe said, “Have you agreed to the marriage proposed by His Majesty?”

“I have not.”

“Oh? Why not? Please pardon me; we Xianbei people have always been direct.”

The other girls laughed and stared at Chen Xing. The corners of Chen Xing's mouth twitched. "There are no feelings between us," he replied.

"But feelings can be nurtured, can they not?"

"We'd still have to wait until they've been nurtured before anyone mentions marriage."

Chen Xing was now relatively calm about the idea of marriage between two men. He had to find other excuses to shut up this bunch of Hu people who disregarded laws and morality and liked to tear traditions to shreds.

One of the girls smiled at Qinghe. "He already has someone, so Yan-ge shouldn't hold onto too much hope. If it were me, I would definitely marry the Great Chanyu."

She spoke in the Xianbei language, which Chen Xing had learned from Yuwen Xin, but in this sort of situation, it was better to pretend he didn't understand it. He stopped himself from looking to see how Xiang Shu reacted to this.

"He can marry both," replied Princess Qinghe, also in the Xianbei language. "If he's able to fill Wang Meng's position, he could marry the Great Chanyu first, then marry Yan-er…"

Chen Xing was speechless. Xiang Shu, finally unwilling to listen any further, said, "Enough."

Someone arrived outside then, and Chen Xing heard a familiar voice. A guard announced, "The commoner Feng Qianjun would like to pay his respects to Your Royal Highness, Princess Qinghe."

Chen Xing whirled around, but Xiang Shu only shot a brief glance at the door. Feng Qianjun was standing outside the threshold, afraid to come in. He bowed slightly, then stood with his hands tucked into his sleeves. Chen Xing almost couldn't recognize him; Feng Qianjun had changed his clothes from his usual Jianghu style. He had left his saber behind and was wearing a pitch-black cage crown. He had even trimmed his eyebrows. With his complexion as fair as polished jade, he appeared quite stately.

Chen Xing almost called out, “Feng-dage!” but a look from Xiang Shu stopped him.

“The Great Chanyu’s looking for you,” Princess Qinghe said with a casual laugh. “Come in.”

Xiang Shu got up. “Let’s talk somewhere else. We’ll leave now.”

Princess Qinghe didn’t stop them. “His Majesty will be waiting for you to dine with him tonight,” she said. “Come back early.”

Hearing this, Xiang Shu knew that there would be trouble. Ever since he had entered the palace, Fu Jian had let him rest and refrained from mentioning the Purple Scroll of Golden Conferment, so Xiang Shu also didn’t bring it up. He presumed Fu Jian couldn’t hold back any longer and intended to finally ask for the scroll.

Chen Xing and Xiang Shu got up to leave. Feng Qianjun looked up again to cast a glance toward the hall, and Chen Xing was surprised to see a little loneliness in his eyes.

“Feng-dage?” he whispered.

Feng Qianjun nodded and left the palace with Chen Xing and Xiang Shu. At first, the three of them said nothing. Chen Xing thought about things; scrutinizing Xiang Shu, he couldn’t guess at his motives, and he found it even stranger that Feng Qianjun knew Princess Qinghe. He was harboring many suspicions as he followed Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun to a deserted place outside the palace, where a carriage awaited them.

“I heard about what happened last night,” Feng Qianjun said. “Once I’d heard that the two of you were all right, I intended to ask someone to enter the palace today and make some inquiries, but the Great Chanyu summoned me first.”

Chen Xing looked at him, then at Xiang Shu, whose expression remained inscrutable. “Feng-dage, you know Princess Qinghe?”

“In addition to operating banks, the Feng family supplies rarities to the royal family. When I came to Chang’an seven years ago, I got to know her by chance. You’re the one who asked me to come, so please forgive me for speaking bluntly—”

Xiang Shu interrupted him. “I apologize for not being able to save your family’s coachman last night.”

Hearing that someone of Xiang Shu’s lofty status cared about the life and death of a coachman changed Chen Xing’s opinion of him slightly, but Feng Qianjun quickly waved this away. “The coachman has already received a generous burial, and his family has been offered a lot of money in compensation. No one wanted something like that to happen.” He gestured. “Let’s talk in the carriage. Shall we go to the Songbai Residence?”

“This carriage is too small,” Chen Xing remarked.

“I didn’t know that you would both be here. We’ll just have to squeeze a little and make do with this.”

Feng Qianjun’s carriage was extremely narrow. They squeezed in, but Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun had long legs, and it was so cramped they couldn’t move. Xiang Shu’s lips and nose were pressed into Chen Xing’s cheek, and Feng Qianjun’s arm was digging into Chen Xing’s waist. Chen Xing was forced to half-sit on both Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun, with each of them contributing a thigh.

“Why am I the one sitting in the middle?” Chen Xing demanded, feeling a bit petulant.

“Don’t tell me you want the Great Chanyu to sit on my lap?” said Feng Qianjun.

Xiang Shu had nothing to say.

“This is strange,” said Chen Xing. “Don’t you usually ride horseback? Why are you taking the carriage today?”

“Because I don’t want to mess up my hair,” Feng Qianjun replied.

“Why?”

“Don’t ask. It’s upsetting.”

The carriage passed through North Road, the peaceful main road, and wobbled along the street down which Xiang Shu and Chen Xing had returned last night.

“Who on earth ambushed the two of you last night?” Feng Qianjun asked. “And how many of them were there? We have very limited information, and only you two were involved.”

“I don’t know,” Xiang Shu replied dispassionately, slightly muffled by Chen Xing’s face. “It was one person.”

“When the guards on patrol arrived, only the corpse of my coachman remained. Why didn’t you keep fighting and wait for reinforcements?” Feng Qianjun knew that someone of Xiang Shu’s status wouldn’t kill a coachman, and he was almost certain that the two of them had been attacked after they left the Songbai Residence.

“Wait for the guards?” Xiang Shu asked, his tone unchanged. “And let them die in the street, too?”

So that’s it, Chen Xing thought. *He fled last night because he didn’t want the guards on patrol to be killed.*

Feng Qianjun shot Chen Xing a puzzled look. Chen Xing thought for a moment, then decided to explain. “Our attacker was a yao.”

“Another yao? Why do yao show up wherever you go?”

“You think I *want* to keep running into them?” Chen Xing said helplessly. “Don’t confuse cause and effect!”

“This isn’t why I summoned you to the palace,” said Xiang Shu. “Go open the last underground storeroom door.”

Chen Xing was astonished. He had just mentioned this to Xiang Shu that morning, and here Xiang Shu was now, making this demand of Feng Qianjun.

“No way!” Feng Qianjun said. “I don’t have the right to enter, and I couldn’t if I wanted to.”

“Fine. Stop the carriage.”

“What are you going to do?” Chen Xing asked. He could already imagine Xiang Shu storming in single-handedly, stabbing Feng Qianyi to death, and slaughtering everyone in the Songbai Residence.

“In that case,” Xiang Shu said, “there is no need for the Songbai Residence to exist.”

Feng Qianjun looked gobsmacked.

They were squeezed tight in the small carriage. Xiang Shu made to get up, but Chen Xing quickly shifted his weight and pressed him down. Sitting in his lap, Chen Xing tried to smooth things over. “Let’s talk it out peacefully.”

“A fatal disaster will befall the Feng family soon,” Xiang Shu said, “yet they remain conceited and utterly lacking in self-awareness. They’ll die sooner or later, so why shouldn’t I send the whole family on their way now?”

Feng Qianjun took a deep breath, still in a state of shock. Chen Xing, for his part, was scared witless. Xiang Shu had said it straight out, just like that!

It was silent inside the carriage for a moment; some words were lodged in Feng Qianjun's throat, and he couldn't get them out. Finally, with a bit of frustration, he sighed. "I have tried to persuade my dage more than once."

"That has nothing to do with me," Xiang Shu said. "Open the storeroom door."

"And if I don't?" Feng Qianjun asked stiffly.

"Then tonight I will mobilize the imperial guard to banish the Feng family from Chang'an. I've tolerated you for a very long time, Feng Qianjun."

"Don't, don't," Chen Xing said. "Don't fight. If we're nothing else, we're friends who have gone through the hardships of living in the wild together. Um, Feng-dage, I really need… Could you help me think of something? In, uh, your case, the Saber of Harmony and Life."

Chen Xing glanced at the saber Feng Qianjun carried around with him, the meaning behind his words self-evident. Once the mana of the world was restored, the Harmony Saber would become a magical artifact, and it would be in Feng Qianjun's possession. It could, at the very least, stop Feng Qianjun's older brother, Feng Qianyi—and even if it couldn't, he would still be able to use it for self-defense.

Feng Qianjun fell thoughtfully silent, having received Chen Xing's hint.

Chen Xing knew that Xiang Shu was not joking, and that if he requested a search of the Songbai Residence from Tuoba Yan, he could get it very easily. Still, it would require a bit more work to explain to Fu Jian.

Xiang Shu was of high status and immense authority; he was showing Feng Qianjun a lot of consideration by giving him this warning in advance. If the Feng family had taken their plans no further and been searched by the imperial guards, things could still have been explained

away. Now, though, with Feng Qianjun's older brother up to no good, they were culpable; if they took one wrong step, they might find themselves buried in unmarked graves.

"My dage will absolutely not agree," Feng Qianjun said finally, "but okay, I'll come up with another way. I'll do it for the sake of this family heirloom, the Harmony Saber. Hopefully, after mana is restored in this world, I'll be able to convince my dage and make him understand our responsibilities as members of the Feng family."

Feng Qianjun invited Chen Xing and Xiang Shu into the Songbai Residence at noon. He left them briefly, and then returned and explained, "After lunch every day, the main teller takes an afternoon nap. I'll fetch the keys to the storeroom then."

Xiang Shu, looking just as he always did, ate lunch with Chen Xing in the Songbai Residence. Feng Qianjun watched him, smiling. "Interesting. You're not afraid of me poisoning the food."

"Do you have anything to gain from poisoning it?" Chen Xing asked.

"I'm not afraid of poison," said Xiang Shu. There was nothing Feng Qianjun could say to that.

Chen Xing shot Xiang Shu a surprised look, thinking, *You're immune to poison? That constitution of yours really is strange.*

After some contemplation, Feng Qianjun said, "After his wife passed away, Dage changed a lot. He has been hell-bent on revenge for her and my two nephews."

"That has nothing to do with me," said Xiang Shu.

"Plotting a rebellion is one of the Ten Abominations; all sins can be forgiven except for the Ten Abominations. I can try to advise Dage, but if he doesn't listen to my advice, what else can I do?"

Xiang Shu didn't respond, but Chen Xing was troubled. He wanted to explain things to Feng Qianjun. He had been consistently tight-lipped regarding the Feng brothers' rebellion plot, so if he said too much, it would make it seem like he was trying to hide something.

“I just don’t understand who leaked the news,” Feng Qianjun said at last.

“Not me,” Chen Xing said hurriedly. “I didn’t say anything.”

Feng Qianjun was deep in thought again. It was late in the morning when he finally got up, his movements soft and quiet, gesturing for the other two to wait for a moment while he fetched the keys. He walked barefoot through the corridor and reached the main teller’s room. A moment later, he successfully retrieved the keys.

“There are only three keys,” Feng Qianjun said, showing them to Chen Xing.

Chen Xing accepted them. “I’m just going in to take a look. I promise I won’t touch your family’s things, and I’ll return everything to its original place before I leave.”

Feng Qianjun left to send the storeroom guards away, and Xiang Shu and Chen Xing waited off to the side until everyone was gone. Then Chen Xing opened the storeroom door with a key, but it swung shut seamlessly behind him.

When the door closed, the light vanished. Inside the pitch-dark storeroom, Chen Xing emitted a warm, white light from his hands. Xiang Shu followed behind with his hands in his sleeves. They went down the stairs and once again passed the copper and silver storerooms before entering the area where the gold was kept.

“This place is where the General Administration of the Exorcism Department was located three hundred years ago, during the Han Dynasty,” Chen Xing explained as Xiang Shu looked around. “We are currently standing in their main hall.”

“Have there ever been records in the Exorcism Department on the revival of drought fiends?”

“I don’t know. Rumor has it that in the years after the Exorcism Department disbanded, many ancient records were scattered throughout the world. Shifu had gathered some in Mount Hua, but there are many more

that we don’t know the whereabouts of… Why do you care about drought fiends so much?”

Again, Xiang Shu did not answer his question.

They reached the final secret door. They had already used all the keys, and now only one combination lock remained, situated in the middle of the door.

“This is called the Wheel of Lu Ban.” Chen Xing pondered for a moment. “I studied it under my shifu; it uses some kind of mechanism. When Feng Qianyi brought me here last night, he thought that I knew nothing about it, but in fact, as long as I can hear the sound, I can work out the trick to unlocking the Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches that are embedded within. There are a lot of boxes at my shifu’s place that use this kind of compass—”

“Enough talking.” Xiang Shu put his hand on the back of Chen Xing’s neck and pushed him to stand before the compass, rendering Chen Xing speechless. “Unlock it.”

For a moment, nothing could be heard in the room except for the sounds of the compass rotating. Chen Xing recalled the sound of Feng Qianyi turning it and tried to match it to the positions of the Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches engraved on the compass.

“Xiang Shu?” Chen Xing asked. The white light in his hand only lit up a small area of the compass. Both of them were hidden in the dark. When Xiang Shu didn’t tell him to shut his mouth, he continued, “You’re obviously called Shulü Kong. Why did you say that your family name is Xiang? Why are you called Xiang Shu, not Xiang Kong?”

“What business is that of yours?” Xiang Shu asked indifferently.

It was just that there were a lot of mysteries surrounding Xiang Shu. For example, why was he so preoccupied with drought fiends? When he had posed this question to Xiang Shu when they reunited in Longzhong Mountain, Xiang Shu had claimed he was just “meddling in other people’s business.” From what happened afterward, though, that didn’t seem true. Even his reason for investigating the village that was massacred by the drought fiends didn’t seem very plausible.

Chen Xing stopped moving. “Continue,” Xiang Shu said.

But Chen Xing straightened in place, pondering something. “Wait, Xiang Shu,” he said after a moment. “I have one condition.”

“You dare negotiate conditions with me?” Xiang Shu clamped his fingers down on Chen Xing’s shoulders, and half of Chen Xing’s body went sore and limp.

“That’s not what I mean! Let me go! Listen to me! I feel resentment behind this door.” Chen Xing was almost certain now. What he had felt the previous time he entered the bottom of the storeroom was not an illusion; there really was something there. “I think there’s some kind of seal here. I don’t know what exactly it has to do with Feng Qianyi, but it is very likely affecting him somehow.”

“Cut the crap and get to the point!”

“This secret underground storeroom in the headquarters of the Exorcism Department—don’t touch me! Let me finish! It might have a seal, which can’t be dealt with through combat.”

“All right,” Xiang Shu said, “I’m listening.”

“I’m not sure how to deal with it, but you need to serve as my protector. Most importantly, you have to ensure my safety. You must wholeheartedly and unreservedly believe in me and listen to me in order for us to deal with this danger.”

“Don’t you always boast about your good luck?” Xiang Shu asked in a mocking tone.

“I really don’t know what I did to provoke you. What bone do you have to pick with me?”

“You didn’t provoke me, and I have no bone to pick with you.”

“Let’s discuss this like adults, then. Is it so difficult for you to be my protector for a while? The power that can be drawn from the Heart Lamp could be much greater than before, if you’re willing. You saw its effect on Longzhong Mountain. According to the records, magic can only be utilized to its utmost when exorcists and their protectors entrust their lives to each other.”

“You’re trying to coerce me with nonsense like that?” Xiang Shu scoffed. “Open the door!”

“Of course not! I’m just afraid that there will be something difficult to deal with inside.”

Xiang Shu fell silent for a long time. When Chen Xing turned to look at him, Xiang Shu said, “Okay.”

“Woof! Woof!”

“Ah!” Chen Xing yelped, startled by the sudden barks. He turned around to see Feng Qianjun carrying a small dog. “Huh*?* Why are you here?”

“It smelled your scent on me, so it followed me all the way here,” said Feng Qianjun.

It was the dog that Chen Xing had picked up on the road and entrusted to Feng Qianjun when they arrived in Chang’an. It had been a few days since they’d seen each other, and the dog was wagging its tail at Chen Xing.

Chen Xing took it from Feng Qianjun and stroked its head. He had gotten such a fright that his heart had almost leaped out of his throat. “Feng-dage, when did you arrive?”

“Around the time you asked the Great Chanyu to wholeheartedly and unreservedly listen to you.”

Obviously, Xiang Shu had known that Feng Qianjun was there. Feng Qianjun’s footsteps were soft, but he couldn’t hide from an expert like Xiang Shu. “I’ve already unlocked the door,” Chen Xing said. “I’ll open it now.”

He took a deep breath and returned the compass to its original position. A clicking sound came from within, and the door unlocked. Then he stepped forward to push the door.

It didn’t budge an inch. Chen Xing was confused.

“It must have been closed for too long.” He turned sideways and leaned against the stone door with his shoulder, then pushed it with all his

might. “It’s jammed from the inside…” His feet slipped on the ground. “Protector! Give me a hand!”

Xiang Shu lifted Chen Xing up by his collar and moved him aside, then extended his forefinger and middle finger, hooked an opening beside the compass, and pulled it to one side. With a loud rumble, the door slid to the left.

“Oh,” said Chen Xing. “It’s a sliding door.”

The space inside was pitch-black. Chen Xing raised his hand, and the light from the Heart Lamp filled the room, illuminating its depths.

It was dark, narrow, and only about eleven square yards, so when the Heart Lamp lit up, everything inside could be seen at a glance. The puppy became fearful when the door opened, and it turned tail and ran.

Stepping inside, Chen Xing cried out when he saw that a shelf on the left side of the room was filled with a mess of broken bamboo slips. There were dozens of small boxes piled up on the right, and a locked iron cabinet stood in the middle of the room.

“It’s been buried underground for too long,” Chen Xing murmured. He reached out and removed a bamboo slip from the shelf as he spoke, his eyebrows furrowed.

The storeroom could barely accommodate all three men; whenever they turned or moved, they bumped into each other. Feng Qianjun looked up to inspect their surroundings. “These must be the relics dug up from the ground when we constructed the storeroom.”

“Can you read it?” Xiang Shu asked Chen Xing.

Chen Xing regretfully handed a bamboo slip to Xiang Shu. Three hundred years had passed, and after such a long time buried in the ground, suffering erosion from running water, the slips were covered in sand and mud—what had once been written on them could no longer be read.

“I was so close,” Chen Xing said helplessly. “I was just one step away. Damn it!”

“Are you sure that if the writing could be made out, you’d be able to find what you want?” Xiang Shu asked. He grasped Chen Xing’s wrist with one hand and lifted it slightly, using him as a lamp to illuminate the bamboo slip in his hands.

“At the very least, I’d be able to find some clues!”

Feng Qianjun opened a box. “Take a look at this?”

Inside was a large lump of hard-shelled items stuck together. Feng Qianjun broke off a piece—it was paper. When paper was soaked in water, its paste clumped together, and hardened masses like this were the result when it eventually dried up.

Chen Xing struggled a few times to get Xiang Shu to let go of his wrist. Xiang Shu threw the bamboo slip aside and began scrutinizing an empty scabbard. “What’s written on this?” he asked.

Chen Xing recognized the ancient characters written in seal script on the scabbard: “The fetters of saṃsāra bind unyielding; may they be severed by the Sword of Wisdom.”

He turned to the heavy iron cabinet with a black iron lock that stood in the center of the room. “Let’s open that and take a look?” He couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something unusual here.

Feng Qianjun motioned for the other two to move. Just as he was about to draw his sword, though, Xiang Shu hooked a finger in the lock, and with single twist, the piece of iron that connected the lock to the door of the cabinet came off.

Before Chen Xing could illuminate the iron cabinet, Xiang Shu stepped in front of him. Holding the scabbard with his left hand in a defensive position, he pulled the cabinet door open with his right.

There was a palm-sized dressing mirror inside the cabinet; everything else was made of jade. Chains carved out of white jade were wrapped around the dressing mirror, and the moment the cabinet door opened, dark fog started pervading the air.

Jade was used to exorcise evil spirits. *This is resentment!* Acting decisively, Chen Xing shouted, “Close the cabinet door!”

But his cry came too late. The black fog within blasted out and swept across the entire storage room, wrapping around the three of them.

“Get back!” shouted Xiang Shu.

Chen Xing felt a powerful force drag him in, pulling him ferociously toward the mirror. He had barely managed to turn around when he found himself wrapped in a whirlwind and pulled into the air. Xiang Shu pushed hard from behind, trying to close the cabinet door, and the scabbard left his hand and was sucked into the mirror.

The iron cabinet shook madly and kept rumbling, looking like the enormous mouth of a monster as it began to devour everything around it. Chen Xing clung to the edge of the storage room door with one hand and gripped Xiang Shu with the other.

“Let go!” Xiang Shu shouted. “Don’t worry about me!”

Chen Xing looked back at him. “What did I say before we came in?”

“Find a way to kick the cabinet door shut!” yelled Feng Qianjun.

But Chen Xing couldn’t hold on any longer. A sharp pain shot through his fingers, jolting his grip loose, and he was swept up by the whirlwind. Xiang Shu immediately wrapped an arm around Chen Xing’s waist to hold him tight, and in the next moment, the two of them were sucked into the mirror.

“Guards!” shouted Feng Qianjun. “Help! Chen Xing!” With one hand, he jammed his saber into the side of the door and looked back at that strange mirror. When he turned to look forward again, his pupils dilated.

Gazing back at him from outside the dark room was none other than his older brother, Feng Qianyi. He leaned back in his wheelchair, holding a lamp in hand and wearing a mask that only covered his eyes. He made a strange expression, giving Feng Qianjun a smile that didn’t seem like a smile, and shook his head helplessly.

Unwittingly, Feng Qianjun loosened his grip. The next moment, he and his saber were swept away into the mirror by the dark storm.

Chapter 18

THE SPINNING LEFT CHEN XING confused and disoriented, and his entire body hurt like he'd been crushed under a giant wheel when he passed through the mirror. All he could do was grab onto whatever he could reach. He heard Xiang Shu shouting next to his ear, but he could no longer make out what he was saying. A loud boom rang out, and Xiang Shu wrapped his arms around him and turned sideways, his back slamming into a wall and bringing the entire thing down. There was another boom as a second wall crumbled, and then another—the third one had fallen too.

Using his body as a shield, Xiang Shu crashed solidly into a fourth wall, which served as a privacy screen blocking off the inner residence. That wall finally stopped them. He and Chen Xing, who was still in his arms, slid to the ground together.

Although Xiang Shu was a skilled martial artist unmatched by any living human, getting knocked through three walls and slamming into four in rapid succession and at such a high speed left him with blood trickling out of the corners of his mouth. He struggled for a long time to sit up.

Chen Xing got up, gasping for breath. "Your chest is so hard, my bones were almost shaken apart by all those impacts. Xiang Shu? Are you okay? Xiang Shu!"

Xiang Shu lay on the ground. He was breathing heavily, and his lips had turned bright red from all the blood.

Chen Xing looked around, realizing that they were in a garden. They were hugging each other tightly, since Xiang Shu had used his back as a shield for Chen Xing. From the large residence not too far away, where they'd been sucked into the mirror, they had been blasted through several walls as if they were nothing more than paper before they finally collided with the wall in the garden.

"Where are we?" Chen Xing wondered aloud.

Xiang Shu shook his head as hard as he could, trying to stop his vision from spinning. He took a deep breath, then began to frown. Chen Xing quickly moved to examine him, looking him over with his medical practitioner's eye.

It was immediately clear to him that Xiang Shu had broken at least one rib. "Sit down," he said. Xiang Shu sat down on the steps outside the large residence, and Chen Xing untied his black robe for him, baring his upper body. He found the rib that Xiang Shu had fractured and started to set it for him.

Throughout the entire process, Xiang Shu didn't utter a sound. His arms trembled slightly as he looked up at the ash-gray sky. It was a cloudy day, and no one was in sight. An eerie silence hung over them.

"There is such strong resentment here," Chen Xing remarked. The flow of air around him was bleak and terrifying; it was as if this place was a battlefield that had experienced innumerable wars and endless bloodshed. He finished straightening Xiang Shu's rib. "Your body is a lot better now."

Chen Xing headed into the huge residence. Without any hesitation, he tore an entire gauzy curtain off its rod and ripped it apart to use as a bandage, which he then wrapped around Xiang Shu's abdomen.

Compared to the first time they'd met, when Xiang Shu had been so skinny he didn't seem human, his muscles were now much more distinct and he had recovered a fair amount of body mass. In particular, his abdominal muscles were like a washboard, beautiful and well-formed. He had lean pectoral muscles, broad shoulders, and a toned back, and he was very fit.

Once his rib was treated, Xiang Shu recovered quickly. He put on his outer robe again, his face settling back into that familiar cold, unapproachable expression, but he seemed to be a little unfocused.

Chen Xing got up and looked around. "Is there anyone there?" This place was too quiet—abnormally so.

Xiang Shu slowly got up. Once he was on his feet, he looked down and saw his scabbard lying on the ground, the one that had been sucked into the mirror.

Chen Xing entered the courtyard. He passed the walls that the two of them had destroyed, and when he arrived at the second privacy wall, he saw another privacy screen to one side, adorned with a scene of an emperor setting out on a procession. Chen Xing looked at it for a while, studying the maker's mark below it, his suspicion mounting. Then he walked further in, Xiang Shu slowly following him, until he stopped in front of a mirror.

Judging by the decorations they had knocked down and the direction in which the bricks had been sent flying, this bronze mirror was where everything began. Chen Xing reached out to touch it, but it was as solid as an ordinary mirror. He knocked on it, and the mirror sounded a crisp, metallic ring.

The two of them kept silent. The atmosphere of this place was strange. "It's too quiet." Xiang Shu said finally.

There were no sounds of birds, insects, or even humans. All that could be heard was some slight rustling when the wind breezed through the foliage.

"Look at the people on the screen," Chen Xing said, motioning for Xiang Shu to look. "They're all carrying the emperor's palanquin with their left hands."

Xiang Shu stopped in front of the screen for a while, just as Chen Xing had. Chen Xing turned and walked out through the front door of this residence, where he encountered a staircase. He climbed to the second floor of the tower, where a platform had been built overlooking the street below. Through the window, he saw an overcast sky. He climbed up another floor and arrived at the top floor of the building, and when he looked out again, he realized what he was looking at: a huge cluster of palace buildings!

Magnificent halls stood in great numbers, their grandeur comparable to Fu Jian's Weiyang Palace. Beyond the palace was a vast, crisscrossing network of streets and alleys, which seemed to be swarming with people despite the darkness of the sky. Xiang Shu and Chen Xing stood behind the railing, looking out.

"This is the world in the mirror," Xiang Shu murmured as he studied the buildings and the words on the railing. "Everything is reversed here.

That mirror sucked us in.”

The top floor of the building, where they were currently standing, appeared to be a place people went to beat the heat, judging by the circular fan and clothing they found there. Chen Xing turned around and picked up the garment, measuring it against his body. The robe was loose-fitting, with large, billowing sleeves; it was a single piece that was meant to be wrapped around the body several times.

“These are clothes from the Han dynasty,” Chen Xing said. A strange theory began to take form in his mind.

He walked down the stairs quickly and passed back through the garden. A slight drizzle had begun, and raindrops pattered down lightly around him. Chen Xing turned his hand palm up and caught a few raindrops; they gave off a faint, black vapor. He turned and walked into another building, where the various lamps, pottery pieces, blankets, tables, and other decorations confirmed his suspicions.

“This is Weiyang Palace!” Chen Xing turned around. “Xiang Shu! Where are you?”

“How do we get back?” Xiang Shu asked.

“We don’t! Follow me! Hurry! We’re in Chang’an as it was during the Han dynasty!”

Present-day Chang’an, within the dark room under the Songbai Residence.

Feng Qianyi took off his mask and set it aside, then pushed his wheelchair forward. From the cabinet, he pulled out the mirror, which had black smoke curling around it. That black smoke began to wrap around his body, as if it was becoming one with him.

Feng Qianyi touched the mirror and chanted some words, and the image of the Weiyang Palace of the Han dynasty began to appear.

“Woof!” Before he could react, a mongrel dashed toward him, grabbed the mirror in its teeth, and rushed out.

Feng Qianyi had forgotten about the dog! “Get back here!” he shouted. “Get back here right now!”

The dog ran so fast that, in the blink of an eye, it and the mirror in its mouth had disappeared. Feng Qianyi pushed his wheelchair as fast as he could, chasing after it, but however hard he tried, he was still limited by the speed of his chair. By the time he reached the second floor, the dog had already run back up to the first floor. When he reached the first floor, breathing heavily, the dog and the mirror were gone.

Feng Qianyi wheeled himself out, calling anxiously, “Where’s the dog?! Guards! Help me find that dog! What’s it called again?” As he spoke, he finally remembered what Feng Qianjun had called it when he brought the dog home. “Quick! Find that dog called Xiang Shu!”

The dog, meanwhile, squeezed out of the dog hole in the Songbai Residence’s garden, its tail wagging happily all the while, and ran off.

The Chang’an of the Han Dynasty.

“Where are we going?” Xiang Shu demanded. “Tell me what we’re doing right now! We have to find a way to get out of here!”

“We’re heading to the headquarters first!” Chen Xing replied. “We’ll be able to find the answer to that question in the Exorcism Department! This is the Chang’an of the past, so the Exorcism Department must still exist!”

Based on the decorations and maker’s seals he had spotted along the way, this was Chang’an as it was during Emperor Ai’s reign. But it was strange; after the Silence of All Magic, all magical artifacts in the world had lost their effectiveness. No matter how godly this mirror was, it shouldn’t have activated, so how on earth had it sent them there? Unless…

That damn Feng Qianyi had known about the mirror all along!

Chen Xing searched for a way out of the palace, and once they left it, they didn’t see a single person along the way. In fact, they didn’t encounter any living things at all. Not even birds and butterflies seemed to exist.

“You said before that all magical artifacts are useless now!” Xiang Shu was frowning. “If that’s the case, then what is this mirror?”

“That’s how things are supposed to be, I don’t know why—”

But suddenly, Chen Xing stopped. *Hold on*. Chen Xing recalled the black vapor that had wound around the mirror. That was…

“Someone used resentment to activate the mirror’s powers,” he said. “This isn’t the past. This is the world within the mirror. Three hundred years ago, when this mirror still had mana, it was capable of creating a copy of the present world! That’s right—this artifact has the power to reproduce the present world, without any human beings or living creatures in it.”

Chen Xing didn’t understand the operating principles behind the artifact, but he could roughly infer why they had arrived in the Chang’an of Han times based on what he saw before him. Three hundred years ago, this mirror had abundant mana to draw from, so exorcists could skip back and forth between their present world and the world within the mirror. But after the Silence of All Magic, the mirror lost its magical powers.

After that, someone managed to get their hands on it, and they refined it anew with resentment from the human world. Now, this artifact was driven by resentment and thus gained power from the darkness instead of mana…but the mirror world that it had copied remained. It contained Chang’an as it had been the day that the Silence of All Magic occurred!

“This is great!” Chen Xing exclaimed. “This is really…”

As he spoke, he and Xiang Shu ran through the palace gates, and Chen Xing suddenly felt as if he had passed through an invisible wall.

“What was that?” Xiang Shu asked doubtfully. He had felt it as well.

Before he could turn back, however, Chen Xing touched Xiang Shu’s arm, motioning for him to look. They both fell silent for a moment.

“Hm,” said Xiang Shu. “It’s good that we’ve finally discovered where those things came from.”

The entire street was packed with a dense mass of humans moving in a horde. They wore tattered clothes and gave off a horrific stench—they

were all living corpses. The streets, alleys, and houses of Chang'an were filled almost to the brim with them.

Detecting movement, the living corpses all moved as one, their murky eyes open and unseeing as they turned toward Xiang Shu and Chen Xing. Chen Xing backed away, slowly and carefully, until he was pressed up against the high wall surrounding the palace.

"Wow," he said, "there are so many drought fiends! Where did they all come from? This is incredible."

Xiang Shu had nothing more than his scabbard, yet he didn't appear to be afraid in the slightest as he stood in front of Chen Xing to protect him.

"Protector," Chen Xing said, "we have an agreement. It's up to you now."

Xiang Shu had to protect Chen Xing so that he could escape as quickly as possible. However, as soon as they moved, all the living corpses that packed the streets charged toward them!

"Why are so many of them here?!" Chen Xing shouted.

"Run!" Xiang Shu roared.

But running was pointless; there were too many of them. The sea of corpses surged forth and submerged them both in an instant. Chen Xing covered his head and ducked behind Xiang Shu. He felt an absence in front of him as Xiang Shu spun around and shot his leg out in a sweeping kick that sent all the living corpses around them flying.

But then their vision went dark again: the horde of living corpses behind the first row had rushed in to fill the gaps. Xiang Shu pushed back the second wave of living corpses until it was bright once more. This time, he dragged Chen Xing along with him, and they began to run. Chen Xing stared at him; he was only now beginning to comprehend that Xiang Shu's brilliant fight against the Jin army had been real. Now he was displaying the true extent of his prowess, his figure moving like a cyclone that kicked away each wave of living corpses that advanced toward them. The corpses never had a chance to get close.

"Hit their heads!" Chen Xing shouted. "Hit them in the head!"

“I can’t!” Xiang Shu growled. “I don’t have any hands to spare! Are there any in front of us?”

“The entire street is full of them! There are still a lot of them!”

Xiang Shu tossed the scabbard to Chen Xing and began to pummel the living corpses with both his arms and his legs. Just like that, wholly unarmed, he managed to clear a path. Chen Xing hugged the scabbard and scrambled along behind him, trembling with fear as he ran. He kept careful count of the living corpses that Xiang Shu had dispatched along the way. Bodies flew through the air, and Xiang Shu picked some up to use as weapons against the others as if they were nothing more than sandbags. He swept them across, smashing all the other living corpses out of the way.

“Three hundred and ninety-nine! Four hundred!” Chen Xing shouted. “You’ve hit four hundred!”

“We can’t keep going like this! There are too many of them!”

“Can you climb up onto the wall? And run along it?”

“We can’t get away! It’s too crowded! There’s no way to get up there!”

Xiang Shu would have loved to use his skills in leaping onto roofs and vaulting over walls, but the space was too cramped. Every time he cleared a small area, living corpses rushed in to fill it. He dragged Chen Xing along, trying to pull him up onto the wall, but Chen Xing yelped in protest. “It’ll pop out of the socket! Don’t yank it like that! My arm will dislocate!”

Xiang Shu rolled his eyes. “This won’t work! Retreat!”

“I’ll think of something!” Chen Xing said. “I…can only glow, though! Wait! Glowing! Glowing should work!”

Chen Xing lit up his Heart Lamp, and the horde of living corpses in front of him wailed in anguish as they dissolved into nothingness.

Xiang Shu gasped for breath. His rib hadn’t healed yet, and it was now throbbing sharply. He looked around at their surroundings, then back at Chen Xing.

“Wow! That was great!” Chen Xing said. Xiang Shu just stared at him.

Chen Xing was leaning against the wall of a house along the side of the street. A bright light shone from his hand, and wherever it touched, the living corpses scurried away, leaving crescent-shaped arcs of empty space. Just as they had on Longzhong Mountain, the living corpses avoided any area illuminated by the white light.

Before Chen Xing could celebrate too much, though, he had to quickly dodge Xiang Shu’s fist. “What are you hitting me for?!” he wailed.

As soon as Chen Xing dodged, the white light from his Heart Lamp disappeared, and the living corpses roared and closed in on them!

Xiang Shu was just trying to threaten him, not actually hit him. “Glow! Hurry!” he shouted, grabbing Chen Xing’s wrist and forcibly dragging him out to face the living corpses.

“My arm’s gonna break! Don’t be so rough!” The light came back, and the living corpses fled again. “Are you thinking that you want to kill me right now?”

Xiang Shu didn’t respond. They both observed their surroundings. “Let’s go!” said Xiang Shu.

He dragged Chen Xing forward, half-carrying him along. Suddenly, he turned around again, startling Chen Xing.

“What are you doing?!”

“Behind you!” Xiang Shu said impatiently.

The white light of the Heart Lamp seemed to be the natural enemy of the living corpses, but as soon as he turned around, the living corpses behind him flocked toward them again. As Xiang Shu carried Chen Xing, he occasionally turned them around before turning right back again, as if they were dancing.

“Are we performing a Sogdian Whirl?” Chen Xing demanded as they faced the front, then the back, then the front again.

“Shut up,” Xiang Shu said tonelessly.

“Are you thinking that you want to hit me again?”

“Yes.”

In the distance, a man’s voice called out, “Is there anybody here? Damn it, what is this place?!”

The two of them looked up at the same time. It was Feng Qianjun.

In present-day Chang’an, night had already fallen over Weiyang Palace.

“Where is he?”

For the first time in his life, Fu Jian had been stood up for a dinner meeting. The only person in the world who would dare miss an appointment with him was the stubborn, contrary Great Chanyu.

“Did you tell him?” Fu Jian asked Princess Qinghe.

Princess Qinghe looked confused. “Tell him what? I asked him to come over to the palace with Chen Xing tonight to dine with Your Majesty, just as Your Majesty ordered.”

Tuoba Yan had also arranged to meet with Chen Xing during the day, but Chen Xing had not shown up. Tuoba Yan now stood off to the side, wanting to speak but hesitating to do so.

“Go look for him,” said Fu Jian. He was beginning to grow concerned. “See if he’s left the city.”

On the night of their first meeting, before Fu Jian could drop any subtle hints to Xiang Shu, he’d found himself subject to a wave of cynicism and mockery. That coldness had made both parties wary of each other. Recently, he had received many reports of goings-on in the palace—old fogeys and youngsters from each tribe were openly strolling in to visit the Great Chanyu, hoping that Xiang Shu would enact justice for the Hu people.

Were this an ordinary day, Fu Jian would have laughed Xiang Shu’s absence off. However, Fu Jian’s subordinates were coming forth, one after the other, to report these kinds of meetings. On top of which the Great

Chanyu had gone to Mount Song, where the city's Han people gathered, to meet the Feng family, who were suspected of plotting a rebellion… He couldn't help but wonder at the meaning of Xiang Shu's actions.

Princess Qinghe saw that she couldn't hide it anymore. Besides, if Fu Jian really wanted to investigate something, no information in Chang'an could escape him. "Around noon," she told him, "the Great Chanyu and Chen Xing left with Feng Qianyi's brother, Feng Qianjun."

Fu Jian was stunned, but he quickly snapped to his senses. "Send out your men to figure this out," he told Tuoba Yan, sending him away. "Shulü Kong's Han name is Xiang Shu. Don't say you're looking for the Great Chanyu, in case it ends up causing some unexpected trouble."

Fu Jian wasn't afraid that Xiang Shu was conspiring with the Feng family; he just wanted to know what on earth he was up to. Chang'an's soldiers were all under the command of his trusted aides, and it had been a long time since the Great Qin unified the north, so a rebellion wouldn't stir up too much of a storm. It was even less likely that Tuoba Yan would betray him.

Tuoba Yan knew that Chen Xing was on good terms with the Feng family, but he kept that information to himself, afraid of exposing some kind of secret. He just wanted to find Chen Xing as soon as possible and persuade him to turn back while he still could. He left the palace immediately and dispatched his soldiers to search for them.

In the mirror world, day and night looked exactly the same.

When Feng Qianjun was thrown out of the mirror, he landed so harshly that blood gushed from his head. After he managed to stop the bleeding, he was waylaid by a large group of living corpses. Having seen them once on Longzhong Mountain, however, he didn't waste too much time being surprised; he merely turned tail and ran. He jumped onto the roof of a nearby residence, then crept forward to watch the situation play out. The living corpses had clustered below, all looking up at him but unable to climb up to reach him.

Feng Qianjun ripped off some of the roof tiles, thinking that he could use them as projectiles. They did smash in the heads of a few living corpses, but he was heavily outnumbered and he ran out of tiles before long. If he took any more off the roof, he would end up falling off, so he was left with no choice but to stop and call for help.

That was when he saw Xiang Shu and Chen Xing hurrying over. Chen Xing was so dizzy from spinning around that he could only move along the wall, his back pressed against it to keep himself upright.

“Come down!” Xiang Shu shouted.

After Chen Xing drove away the living corpses below, Feng Qianjun jumped down, but another group of living corpses crowded around him instantly. “Good job!” he shouted. “I’m here now!”

He fought with all his might to get to Chen Xing, and Chen Xing and Xiang Shu sped up as they darted toward Feng Qianjun. Wherever the light went, it drove the living corpses away like herds of sheep, trampling each other in their haste to flee.

But then Feng Qianjun realized a serious problem. He shouted, “Wait, wait, wait! Don’t point it right at me—”

Before he could finish, thousands of living corpses bowled him over as they fled along the street. A second large group ran across the street in their wake, crushing Feng Qianjun underfoot.

Chen Xing finally arrived and pulled him to his feet.

“That mirror…” Feng Qianjun pointed in the direction he’d come from. Xiang Shu raised his hand to indicate that he need not speak further and should follow him and Chen Xing.

Chen Xing’s head was spinning from all the whirling around. Living corpses would suddenly rush out from roadside alleys, and having to stay on edge to guard against them was thoroughly exhausting him.

“Can your other hand glow too?” asked Feng Qianjun.

“Ah, yes! Both my hands can.”

Thus, Chen Xing, with the Heart Lamp's light shining forth from both hands, turned sideways to walk horizontally. He pointed one hand out in front and the other one backward.

"Isn't that much better? Can your entire body glow too?"

"That's too tiring," Chen Xing said.

"The Great Chanyu and I can carry you."

Chen Xing rejected this proposal. "My mana reserves would be exhausted very quickly. Even using the weakest spells can be tiring."

Feng Qianjun abandoned that idea, and the three of them crossed half of Chang'an with Chen Xing shuffling along sideways.

"How are we going to get out of here?" Feng Qianjun asked, once Chen Xing had explained his speculations about the world they found themselves in.

"Let's look for clues in the Exorcism Department. We got in, so there must be a way out."

"Why is this place so gusty, with such eerie winds?" Feng Qianjun asked. "I can feel a chill running down my back."

"Someone pulled a large amount of resentment into the mirror," Chen Xing explained.

As they spoke, Mount Song, which lay to the northwest of the city, appeared on the horizon. In the valley at the foot of the mountain stood an ancient mansion that had been nestled there for a long time.

"That must be the place!" Chen Xing said. Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun suddenly moved forward from both sides, standing in front of Chen Xing.

From the foot of the mountain, several shadows swarmed toward them, swirling around where the main street ended and the path to Mount Song began. More shadows on the grounds gathered in that area, their number steadily growing.

"What kind of sorcery is this?" murmured Feng Qianjun. Chen Xing remembered the shadow assassin that had hunted down him and Xiang Shu.

“They’re not easy to deal with,” Xiang Shu cautioned. “Be careful.”

The shadows spewed fog, and they began to spin faster and faster, creating a whirlwind. Nearly twenty masses of shadow stepped out from within the whirlwind. Their human shapes gradually became clearer, resolving into soldiers in black iron armor.

Right in the middle of the entrance to the path, the largest shadow appeared: a general, dressed from head to toe in a suit of Jin Dynasty iron armor and riding a skeletal warhorse.

“That’s the assassin from last night!” Chen Xing exclaimed.

“You’re certain?” Xiang Shu asked.

“There’s no mistake! I recognize its helmet!”

“I’ll stall them while the two of you rush in,” said Xiang Shu. “I’ll meet up with the both of you later. Feng Qianjun, you’re responsible for making sure he gets in safely.”

“No, no, no,” Feng Qianjun said. “Tianchi, you can glow, and—”

Xiang Shu shouted, “Go!”

“Wait!” Chen Xing shouted back, but Xiang Shu didn’t wait for a response. He bent over and dashed forward.

“Hey! All you have is a scabbard!” Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun yelled together. “Great Chanyu! Come back!”

Chapter 19

“GO!” FENG QIANJUN urged Chen Xing. He wasn’t going to bother with Xiang Shu anymore—that man was on his own now.

Feng Qianjun wrapped his arm around Chen Xing and dragged him toward the entrance. As Xiang Shu rushed in, he and Chen Xing ducked below the belly of the black-armored general’s horse and slid right past. Chen Xing wanted to glance back, but Feng Qianjun roared, “Don’t look!”

He turned Chen Xing’s head back, picked him up, and ran. In an instant, they put about ten feet of distance between themselves and the shadows, but Chen Xing was still waving at Xiang Shu, shouting, “Xiang Shu! Run!”

Xiang Shu brandished the scabbard, which gleamed with a brilliant light under the murky sky. The black-armored warrior spurred his horse forward to kill Xiang Shu, but Xiang Shu deftly drew a short distance away without confronting him head-on. Between one breath and the next, the scabbard spun and severed the arm of the soldier who had charged at him.

The scabbard, crafted from pure steel interwoven with gold and silver threads, was extremely challenging to wield, but in Xiang Shu’s hands, it transformed into a versatile weapon akin to a soft whip. With the slightest shake, it shimmered with radiance as light reflected off its surface.

The enemies regrouped before turning to face Xiang Shu. Silence fell. The warriors whose arms and legs had been severed started gathering their limbs from the ground and reattaching them to their bodies. As their body parts rejoined, soft, wriggling flesh formed, knitting the broken sections back together.

“Who are you people?!” Xiang Shu spun around, gripping the scabbard as he blocked the entrance to the valley. His eyes were wide with fury. “What is your connection to Kjera?! Speak!”

No one answered him. Instead, the black-armored general raised his halberd—a signal to charge. The shadow warriors bowed in unison and

urged their skeletal warhorses into a fierce onslaught.

At the entrance of the Exorcism Department Headquarters, Chen Xing felt as if he had bumped something or passed through an invisible barrier.

“What’s our next move?” Feng Qianjun asked. “It’s all up to you now!”

Chen Xing descended underground and gazed up at the plaque outside the residence. Five large words were inscribed, inverted, on the plaque: “All Things Share One Origin.” A stone tablet also stood outside the entrance, reading “Han Dynasty Exorcism Department Headquarters.”

“Found it! Amazing! I knew it would be here!” Chen Xing rushed into the Exorcism Department. The interior decor was nearly identical to what he had read about in books, but it was empty. Even though he knew that only drought fiends remained in the mirror world and that no living people were present, he clung to a thread of hope, shouting, “Is anyone here? Is anyone here?”

Only echoes answered him: *“Is anyone here, is anyone here, is anyone here…”*

Feng Qianjun glanced left and right. “Do we have any magical artifacts here?” he shouted. “We need to find a way to push back the enemies!”

Chen Xing felt a surge of anxiety; the hordes were still in pursuit outside. Even if the Exorcism Department had magical artifacts, how useful would they be now?

In the main hall of the Exorcism Department, the central plaque still bore a reversed inscription—“Illuminate the Vast Expanse”—and beneath it lay a heavy black sword. Feng Qianjun moved to take the sword, but it resisted, seemingly welded to its stand. He rushed to the second floor, where he exclaimed, “Oh, this is bad. Tianchi, your protector’s in danger.”

Chen Xing hurried after him. From the second floor, he saw Xiang Shu sprinting ahead amidst charging enemies, heading toward a distant valley.

Xiang Shu understood well the futility of trying to confront a charging army head-on. He needed to create distance at least three times their advance to exhaust their strength before he counterattacked. However, if he continued forward, he would reach the entrance of the Exorcism Department. He was forced to instead circle around and engage the enemy in repeated skirmishes.

Suddenly, a three-foot-long wooden arrow whistled through the air, lodging itself in a tree and bringing a gust of wind with it!

Xiang Shu looked up and spotted Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun on the third floor of the Exorcism Department, each manning a corner with a grounded repeating crossbow. “Lure the fiends over!” shouted Chen Xing.

Xiang Shu darted to the front of the Exorcism Department. Chen Xing operated the mechanism vigorously, exerting all his strength to crank the repeating crossbow. When either of them pulled their crossbow’s lever, a volley of sharp arrows shot out in rapid succession, springing from the magazine with a clatter and raining down on the ground outside the Exorcism Department’s gate like a torrential downpour.

Xiang Shu only narrowly avoided being pierced. “Do you even know how to shoot arrows?!” he yelled.

“Of course not!” Chen Xing shouted back. “Don’t expect too much! Just make do!”

Feng Qianjun intervened. “It was me who shot that arrow!” he yelled. “Never mind, I’m coming down to help you!” He leaped down from the third floor, unsheathing his Harmony Saber, and rushed in to support Xiang Shu.

In that moment, they both witnessed the formidable power of Chen Xing’s Sui Xing. Chen Xing hollered as he operated the repeating crossbow, spinning around and shooting. Every arrow he fired found its mark—no matter the target or direction, the arrows struck the heads of the undead, felling them instantly. The black-armored general was left stunned, and in less time than it would take half an incense stick to burn down, all his subordinates lay defeated on the ground.

The general decisively spurred his horse to retreat. Chen Xing continued operating the repeating crossbow, and with his final arrow, he shouted, “Whoosh!”

As Chen Xing ceased firing the crossbow and attempted to back away, he stumbled and fell, grasping the trigger as he went down. The angle of the repeating crossbow shifted, and the arrow shot into the sky. Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun both readied their weapons, their eyes fixed on the arrow’s arc. As the general rode hastily out of the valley, the arrow flew more than a hundred paces before descending obliquely and striking the general’s helmet with a resounding clang. The impact severed his head and sent it spinning through the air.

Without uttering another word, Xiang Shu sprinted forward. The general lunged to grab his own head, but Xiang Shu leaped into the air, spun gracefully as if he were playing cuju, and delivered a kick that sent the general’s head flying. Feng Qianjun followed closely, executing a somersault with one hand on the ground and seamlessly continuing the motion with another kick that propelled the head straight into the Exorcism Department.

Chen Xing followed through with a kick of his own and sent the head rolling down the stairs from the third floor. However, as his kick connected, he howled in pain. The helmet was incredibly hard; it smashed through two staircase boards before landing with a heavy thud, raising a cloud of dust.

Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun safely retreated into the Exorcism Department. Outside, the general, now a headless knight, wandered around on horseback, apparently searching for his lost head. Xiang Shu taunted him with his scabbard, but the general ignored him, and eventually left.

Chen Xing walked to the center of the hall and took hold of the sword. As he wielded it, the heavy iron sword began to shine with a white light, and a befuddled look crossed his face. A circle of luminous incantation patterns appeared on the ground around the heavy iron sword.

Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun both glanced at the sword. Chen Xing had lifted it effortlessly, and he gazed down at it in bewilderment before tossing it to Xiang Shu.

Xiang Shu caught the sword, swung it, and briefly brandished it with one hand. He made to chase their enemy, but the headless general had already fled the canyon. The three of them breathed simultaneous sighs of relief.

Chen Xing strutted over to the couch in the Exorcism Department's main hall and sat down. With open arms and trembling legs, he said, "See? Didn't you have to rely on me in the end?"

Xiang Shu's fingers twitched slightly, then he took a deep breath.

"My dear xiandi is amazing indeed," said Feng Qianjun. "But…how do we get out now? Do you have any ideas?"

"Let's take a break," Chen Xing replied. "I'm exhausted. We'll find a way out. We got in here, so we can definitely get back out again."

Feng Qianjun picked up the head in the hall and pulled off the helmet, revealing the indigo face inside.

"Be careful," Chen Xing warned him, "it might bite."

Xiang Shu frowned. "These creatures don't seem like the usual drought fiends," he said in a deep voice. "After their limbs are chopped off, they can reattach them. Why would such monsters appear here?"

Chen Xing thought for a moment. "Legend has it that there are many kinds of drought fiends. The living corpses we saw before would have been of the lowest level, while this warrior type seems like the highest level. Huh? Feng-dage, that face looks pretty handsome."

Feng Qianjun took off the helmet and carefully held up the head to show the others. It glared with wide eyes, opening its mouth and making various expressions, baring its white teeth and twisting around violently as if it wanted to bite someone.

"Bring the head over," Chen Xing said. "I want to take a proper look at it."

Feng Qianjun placed the head on the table. When Chen Xing picked up a tree branch and poked at its mouth, the head bit the branch in half. He recalled that after he shot the warriors in the head, the living corpses lost their ability to move. It seemed, however, that as long as the head was still

intact, even if separated from the body, the body could still move. In other words, if they split this head in half, then the headless knight wandering outside…

Chen Xing was studying the handsome man's nose when a book was thrown in his face. "Hey!"

"Is that what you're looking for?" Xiang Shu was already impatient from waiting. He had rummaged through the storeroom and found a book filled with Han seal script. Seal script, a distorted script that was difficult to decipher, originated in the Qin Dynasty and was used for official and formal occasions. Nowadays, the official script was more commonly used, which was challenging enough for the Hu people to learn. Seal script was even harder to understand.

"The words here are all inverted," Chen Xing said, holding the book. "It's so hard to read. Where did you find this?"

"On a shelf in the basement. It's incomplete. This book is special; you'll understand when you see it."

Chen Xing opened the book and found more ancient and intricately styled seal script, but unlike the inverted words seen elsewhere in the mirror world, these adhered to the norms of his world! What did this signify…? Someone from the present had authored this book after entering the mirror world!

Though Xiang Shu wasn't well-versed in seal script, he was able to discern this tome's peculiarity from the left and right orientation of the pages. Most books on the shelves opened from the right, but this one opened from the left.

"This is a handwritten book from two hundred and ninety-nine years ago," Chen Xing muttered. "Who left this record here?"

"Read it," Xiang Shu said.

"'It is the Eighteenth Year of Yongping. In my humble existence of over three hundred years in the human world, I have roamed all across the Divine Land and finally found the Dinghai Pearl in Lake Baikal…' The Dinghai Pearl? 'The Silence of All Magic has been foretold to be the final

ending of all exorcists. Only the Dinghai Pearl is still able to release a torrent of spiritual qi.’”

Chen Xing’s eyes widened.

“‘After this magical artifact was obtained, all records should have been destroyed. But man proposes and god disposes; eight out of ten worldly affairs are doomed to failure. As a precautionary measure, this book will be hidden in the Yin Yang Mirror. If something unexpected were to happen…’ Oh, never mind,” Chen Xing muttered. “One can only do one’s best. The vicissitudes of life pass with a mere flick of the finger, so what benefit is there in plotting for posthumous matters?”

He flipped to the next page, but the last few pages contained no words, only simple, ink-drawn lines that appeared to form a map. His instinct told him that the records left in this book related to the Silence of All Magic.

“This was left behind by one of my exorcist predecessors,” Chen Xing told Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun. “I don’t know why he did this…but he must know the truth behind the Silence of All Magic!”

The three of them pondered this for a long while. Finally, Xiang Shu frowned and said, “It didn’t mention the drought fiends.”

Chen Xing shook his head. “No, it didn’t.”

“So, was he the one who created the mirror world?” Feng Qianjun asked.

Chen Xing nodded. “Perhaps. Judging from the timeline, the book was written the year after the Silence of All Magic. By that time, all the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth had already disappeared, but this person found a magical artifact called the ‘Dinghai Pearl’ and used it to restore mana.” As he spoke, he looked around, scrutinizing the space they were in. “Then he activated the Yin Yang Mirror, created the mirror world we’re in now, and…left behind an unfinished book in this mirror world?”

Xiang Shu flipped through the several-page-long map at the back of the book. He studied the last page, which depicted simple mountains, rivers,

and lakes without any text marking the locations. “No,” he said, frowning deeply. “That’s not right, unless you made a mistake in your explanation.”

Chen Xing blinked at him. “That’s what was written in the book. It’s very reasonable. All the mana in the world was gone, this senior found the Dinghai Pearl, and it was the key to restoring mana… Wait, no.” Something about that wasn’t quite right, after all, though he couldn’t pinpoint what.

Feng Qianjun said, “In the book, it was mentioned that he had been searching for the Dinghai Pearl for ‘hundreds of years.’ The human world had mana back then, and the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth hadn’t disappeared yet. Even if he knew the reason for its disappearance, how could he have foreseen the centuries to come and started searching for the Dinghai Pearl in advance?”

Chen Xing fell silent.

“Where’s the Dinghai Pearl?” Xiang Shu asked. Chen Xing shrugged, looking baffled. “I think it’s highly unlikely that it’s in the mirror.”

Chen Xing agreed with that. Xiang Shu flipped through the map on the last three pages of the book.

“Maybe it’s in one of the places on this map,” Xiang Shu suggested. “Strange. What did he do after he got the Dinghai Pearl? Could it have been snatched up by someone else?”

“That’s the next clue,” Chen Xing said, taking a deep breath. “We finally have a lead now. This is great, our trip here wasn’t in vain. But we’ll need to think of a way to retrieve the Yin Yang Mirror first. Now that it’s in the hands of Feng-dage’s brother…things are a little dangerous.”

Chen Xing glanced at Feng Qianjun, and the three of them came to a tacit understanding. They’d connected the pieces, and they could almost reconstruct the timeline of events. Firstly, after the Silence of All Magic, this exorcist had left behind a powerful magical artifact—the Yin Yang Mirror—at the Exorcism Department Headquarters in Chang’an. While the Feng family was revamping Mount Song and expanding the Songbai Residence onto the old site of the Exorcism Department, they had likely stumbled across the mirror by chance.

But what about the drought fiends?

There were a lot of questions only Feng Qianyi could answer.

Chen Xing got up, keeping the book. “Where did you find this?” he asked. “Take me there.”

Feng Qianjun was about to get up and follow when Xiang Shu made a gesture. Feng Qianjun knew what Xiang Shu meant: He had to avoid arousing suspicion. He stopped and said, “I’ll keep guard up here.”

Chen Xing headed down to the underground storeroom with Xiang Shu on his heels. Compared to the small storeroom in the rebuilt Xifeng Bank, this one was very spacious. It was filled with weapon racks and bookshelves, though the weapon racks were empty.

Xiang Shu pointed at a shelf. Chen Xing found an ordinary bronze mirror, lit up the indoor oil lamp, and began searching through the bookshelves.

“These records are so complete!” Chen Xing exclaimed. He had read a lot of incomplete texts from the Exorcism Department at his shifu’s place. The department kept records of many powerful magical artifacts, but over the years, those records had eroded, and they were deficient by the time they reached Chen Xing. Now, with all the introductions to the magical artifacts before him, Chen Xing felt his spirits lift. His curiosity was piqued, and he couldn’t care less about everything else. Read first, think later!

“Twilight Mist Sash, Yao-Subduing Rod…Heart Lamp? Heart Lamp!”

Chen Xing was astonished to find an ancient record of the Heart Lamp. To safeguard against the loss of techniques from different schools, Great Exorcists of past dynasties had left behind transcribed copies of texts. This way, even in times of war or upheaval, the exorcists who inherited the magical artifacts could return to the department to retrieve the mantras and gain control over them. However, the attributes of the Heart Lamp had always been a subject of intense debate, and many believed it would only appear in an age when demons were about to descend. The Heart Lamp was the only “phantom spiritual treasure” in the world—it had no physical form.

Controversies still existed as to whether it could truly be considered a magical artifact.

This was why Chen Xing reacted as if he had discovered the ultimate treasure. He pushed aside thoughts of the Yin Yang Mirror and, with eager focus, set about reading the bamboo slips. The record detailed the Heart Lamp's usage, including three powers: expelling demons, exorcism, and the guarding of one's heart. Most importantly, just as his shifu had told him, the Heart Lamp was less affected than other magical artifacts by the Silence of All Magic in the present world!

The Heart Lamp drew its power from the three hun and seven po, which existed within the soul—the core of all human beings. When activated, the Heart Lamp lit up to illuminate a vast area, like a spark igniting a prairie fire. This light stirred the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth, amassing it into an even greater force with which to exorcise demons.

When his shifu had taught him about the Heart Lamp's mysteries, it was with only a basic understanding. Now, having finally found the last remaining book on the subject, Chen Xing learned that even in the present state of depleted spiritual qi, the Heart Lamp's three mystical powers, though weakened, could still be harnessed!

The book made one detail even clearer: the Heart Lamp could protect the world from demonic hindrances and expel evil spirits, but it couldn't directly slay demons or be used to harm humans. In essence, this "magical artifact" was meant specifically for restraining demons. Its light could pierce through evil entities, but it had no effect on humans. At most, the light it emitted could scare people away…

"Take it with you. You can read it later," Xiang Shu told him. "The Yin Yang Mirror."

Chen Xing snapped out of his daze. He examined the books from back to front and eventually pulled out a bamboo scroll from the section on "Heavenly" magical artifacts, then unfurled it.

"The Yin Yang Mirror, an ancient magical artifact. It can create replicas of anything in the world and is powered by the Spiritual Qi of the

Heavens and Earth. The inscriptions are engraved on the back."

Xiang Shu held up a lamp for him as Chen Xing skimmed through the description of the magical artifact. Chen Xing frowned. "But how is this Yin Yang Mirror activated, exactly? Unless…"

As he spoke, he remembered a key point he had previously deduced: resentment.

Magical artifacts needed to harness the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth to function. This so-called spiritual qi was essentially the abundant power of heaven and earth in circulation. Resentment left behind after death theoretically had the same origin as spiritual qi, but it manifested differently; where spiritual qi was clear, resentment was muddy, similar to the common concept of the "clear" versus "muddy" qi of heaven and earth. The practice of evil arts involved indulging in either fetal blood rituals or refined human souls, two methods of manipulating resentment.

The person in possession of the mirror had clearly found a way to utilize resentment. Perhaps they had refined this magical artifact on a battlefield with heavy casualties and claimed it for their own use. It was perfectly suited for storing living corpses that couldn't be kept anywhere else.

Chen Xing finished reading the instructions on its usage. "'The Yin Yang Mirror has two sides and one body; the yang side is in the human world, and the yin side is in the mirror world. To reopen the path back to reality, you must find the yin side in this world.'"

The mirror itself had already been refined, so activating it would be straightforward for him. The challenge now was finding where it was hidden.

Xiang Shu flicked the heavy, dark steel sword he was holding, producing a blunt, metallic sound. He motioned for Chen Xing to take a look. "And what's this?"

Chen Xing had Xiang Shu hold out the sword as he examined the patterns on it. "The Nine-Syllable Incantation is engraved on it. It might be used for subduing demons."

“This sword wasn’t found in the Feng family’s secret storeroom; there was only a scabbard there.” Xiang Shu inserted the sword into the scabbard—it was a perfect fit.

“I’m not sure about it either,” Chen Xing said, perplexed. “I’ve never seen any descriptions of this weapon before. The Yin Yang Mirror can create replicas of the present world, but it’s limited by its user’s strength. The more complex the replica, the more mana is required. If I’m right, this mirror world only encompasses Chang’an City, and maybe not even the entire city. If this sword is also a magical artifact, it would be very challenging for the Yin Yang Mirror to create a replica of it. It would require too much spiritual power.”

Chen Xing held up the lamp again and continued searching the shelves until he was satisfied that there was nothing else of relevance. He did, however, find a bamboo slip marked with the words “Saber of Harmony and Life”; it was a description of the precious sword. Having seen the slip before at his shifu’s place, Chen Xing took it down with the intention of passing it to Feng Qianjun.

Xiang Shu looked down at the sword. “Can this be brought back to the present world?”

“That’s hard to say. Do you like it? If you do, then keep it. It belongs to the Exorcism Department anyway. As Head of the Department, I’ll give it to you. Even if it doesn’t have any spiritual power, you can still use it to hit people. Just don’t use it on me!”

Xiang Shu made a gesture and Chen Xing dodged, but Xiang Shu was only teasing him. *So you can crack jokes too?* Chen Xing thought. *I really misjudged you.*

“Guys,” Feng Qianjun called from upstairs. “Are you two done? I think you’d both better come up and take a look. We’re in trouble.”

Xiang Shu strapped the sword and scabbard to his back and climbed quickly to the next floor. Chen Xing followed close behind him and tossed the bamboo slip about the Saber of Harmony and Life to Feng Qianjun. Without time to review it, Feng Qianjun hurriedly led them up to the third floor.

The dark, gloomy sky made it impossible to tell whether it was day or night. The sides of the Mount Song gorge were packed with living corpses, nearly a hundred thousand of them, all surrounding the Exorcism Department Headquarters. Shadow warriors stood watch on the highlands with arrows nocked in their bows. Atop Mount Song, the headless knight sat astride its horse, facing the headquarters of the Exorcism Department.

Chapter 20

THE FOURTH NIGHT WATCH PERIOD in the present world's Chang'an, inside Weiyang Palace's sleeping chambers.

"It is as Your Majesty expected," a military officer reported. "The Great Chanyu, Shulü Kong, and Chen Xing entered the Feng family's residence this afternoon. For some reason, in the evening, the Feng family swarmed out in full force and began a search throughout the city to look for this 'Xiang Shu,' as Your Majesty stated."

Fu Jian had been awakened in the middle of the night. Dressed in an unlined garment, he sat on a couch outside his sleeping chambers. Suppressing his fury, he looked at the military officer with a face full of doubt.

The military officer continued, "I dispatched ten covert investigators to question the servants of the Feng family and scout along the street. We were able to find Xiang Shu before them. By great fortune, we accomplished our mission; this fellow was pacing back and forth outside a steamed bun shop in the dark."

A mongrel stood in front of Fu Jian with a small mirror in its mouth, wagging its tail.

"It got some saliva on the mirror. I wanted to wipe it clean, but this dog refused to let go, no matter what we tried."

When the military officer found "Xiang Shu," he saw the antique mirror in its mouth and, thinking himself clever, inferred the rest of the story himself. Princess Qinghe's beloved mirror must have been snatched away by a dog called Xiang Shu, hence the fuss Fu Jian made about searching the city.

Fu Jian was dumbfounded. The military officer bowed and stepped back. The dog looked to its left and right, puzzled.

"Tuoba Yan didn't instruct you on whether to look for a dog or a person?" Fu Jian asked.

The military officer looked baffled. “Tuoba-daren just said to find a fellow named Xiang Shu…”

In the Xianbei language, “fellow” could refer to people, dogs, or even objects. Tuoba Yan intended to look for a “fellow” called Xiang Shu. His subordinates thought they were supposed to look for a person at first; they only learned it was a dog after questioning the servants of the Feng family, and once they found it, they quickly brought it back to Fu Jian.

When he had brought the dog home, Feng Qianjun, who didn’t know any other name for it and had only heard Chen Xing call it Xiang Shu, naturally referred to it as Xiang Shu. When Feng Qianyi’s magical artifact was snatched and he sent the family out in search of it, they all held up lamps and shouted, “Xiang Shu! Xiang Shu!” This was what the imperial military officers happened to overhear.

“Idiots!” Fu Jian roared. “A bunch of idiots! Where’s Tuoba Yan?!”

Alarmed, the military officer said, “General…uh, he’s not back yet.”

Fu Jian seized the mirror in one lightning-fast move. The dog kept baring its teeth, wanting to snatch it back, but Fu Jian tossed the mirror onto the table. He didn’t want to blow up in the middle of the night, so he dismissed the officer to continue searching.

The clamor also awoke Princess Qinghe. She stretched lazily behind the screen, revealing her lithe figure. Wearing a pair of wooden clogs, Fu Jian wrapped an outer robe around himself and smoothed out his messy hair. With his rough, hairy chest exposed, he let out a long breath.

Princess Qinghe emerged, bleary-eyed. “They haven’t been found yet? Where is Your Majesty going?”

“The study, to meet with Wang Ziye for a discussion. I might as well, since I’m awake. Call someone over to send this dog away.”

“It’s so pitiful, though,” Princess Qinghe said. “Won’t you let it sleep behind the screen for one night?”

And so, Fu Jian took a robe and threw it behind the screen, then chased the dog over. The dog was evidently tired, too. It curled up behind the screen and fell asleep at once.

After Fu Jian left, Princess Qinghe saw the mirror on the table. Frowning, she took it carefully in her hands and studied it.

In the mirror world, the three of them stood on high ground inside the Exorcism Department, facing the mountain of living corpses. Not a single sound could be heard beyond the canyon.

“They dare not come too close,” Xiang Shu said. “Why?”

Feng Qianjun spread out the bamboo slip and held it up under the sunlight to study it. Then he began reading it using the bronze mirror.

“Because the head is with us?” guessed Chen Xing as he looked into the distance.

Xiang Shu frowned. “No, the headless general stopped chasing us when it reached the entrance. Remember when we left the palace?”

Chen Xing recalled then that when they left Weiyang Palace, he’d felt as if he had passed through an invisible wall. He’d had the same sensation when he rushed into the Exorcism Department. Suddenly, he remembered a record in an ancient text he read. “A defensive formation. It must have been established here with the help of a magical artifact or divine weapon! Where is it?”

Chen Xing had read about this—a powerful artifact or weapon, combined with an esoteric exorcism array, could establish invisible walls used to ward off foreign enemies. But they hadn’t seen a single magical artifact since they entered the Exorcism Department. After all, it would be challenging to use the Yin Yang Mirror to create copies of magical artifacts from the real world.

The only thing they’d seen that could possibly be an artifact or a weapon was…

In the same moment, Chen Xing and Xiang Shu both looked at the sword that Xiang Shu was holding. Xiang Shu weighed the blunt sword in his hands. “In that case,” he said in a low voice, “enemies shouldn’t be able to attack this place for the time being.”

But Chen Xing’s expression changed. Incredibly anxious, he hissed, “That’s not necessarily true. Feng-dage! Stop reading! Look!”

The living corpse soldiers seemed to have received an invisible signal. They were all nocking their arrows and pointing them at the three-story headquarters of the Exorcism Department.

Feng Qianjun looked up. “Oh, that’s not good. Find a place to take cover!”

Close to a hundred thousand wooden arrows soared into the air and blotted out the sky. A second later, they pivoted and came down on the middle of the canyon like a rainstorm.

Xiang Shu lunged at Chen Xing at almost the same moment, and they rolled down the stairs. Feng Qianjun followed close behind, running sideways as he went down to the second floor. With a loud rumble, a volley of arrows with a combined force of more than ten thousand pounds crushed the third floor. The arrows’ momentum didn’t fade, and the second floor went down too!

“What do we do?!” Chen Xing shouted.

Xiang Shu kicked a table on the first floor, flipping it up to shield the tops of their heads. Feng Qianjun was still looking down at the bamboo slip, and Chen Xing shouted at him, “Stop reading! Run!”

“Can we stop them if I take this sword out there?” Xiang Shu yelled.

“No! Once it leaves the array here, the defensive formation will lose its effectiveness and disappear!”

Feng Qianjun finally returned to his senses and hollered, “Go underground!”

“No!” Xiang Shu shouted. “We’ll be buried alive!”

“It’s no use!” said Chen Xing. “Once the array is destroyed—”

“Take the head with you!” Xiang Shu said. “Let’s go!”

On all four sides of the canyon, a second wave of arrows pointed at the sky before the soldiers released them simultaneously. Just like that, the decrepit Exorcism Department collapsed. Smoke and dust curled into the air as Xiang Shu grabbed Chen Xing and rushed out the entrance with Feng Qianjun.

As one, the pursuers throughout the valley whipped around to look in their direction and began to chase them.

The scene was astonishing. A tsunami of thousands of living corpses, all scrambling over one another, swept through the valley. Feng Qianjun held the head aloft with one hand, and Chen Xing's feet almost left the ground as Xiang Shu dragged him in a mad dash along the street. They ran for their lives.

"I suggest throwing this head away or destroying it!" Feng Qianjun said. "Look at how relentlessly they're pursuing us. Maybe they want to—"

"Do whatever you want! Try smashing it to pieces!"

The three of them had just passed an intersection on the street when another thousand or so living corpses dressed in rags burst from an alley. Chen Xing resolutely raised his hand and emitted a burst of bright light, which blasted the low-level living corpses away.

Feng Qianjun tossed the head up, drew his blade, and was about to hack the head in two when a black vapor suddenly appeared in the air. It shot over like a meteor, curled around the head, and then, with a surging black flame, flew back toward the living corpses' general.

Feng Qianjun had been caught completely unprepared. He was too stunned to speak.

Xiang Shu looked up at the sky. "What's that?"

Chen Xing stopped and followed his gaze. "I don't know," he murmured. Strangeness pervaded this mirror world at all times.

"Where do we go now?" Feng Qianjun asked.

"The palace," Xiang Shu decided. He patted Chen Xing's back and said in a low voice, "If what you said was correct, there will likely be another formation of some sort there."

"Yes!" It was like Xiang Shu's words had woken Chen Xing from a dream. "To the palace! Quickly!"

Together, the three of them vaulted onto a roof. Feng Qianjun looked up to find that the black-armored general had retrieved its head and was

lining up its troops. The dark mass of soldiers didn't seem to have any intention of letting them go.

He frowned. "What do they want?"

Xiang Shu shrugged, then turned to Chen Xing. "Why can your light drive away ordinary living corpses but not the shadow warriors?"

Chen Xing couldn't stand it any longer. He blew his top. "I don't know! What is this, what is that? Why is this, why is that? How is this, how is that? I'm lost too, okay?! Why are you asking me all the questions?!"

Xiang Shu stared at him.

"Come on!" Feng Qianjun reminded them. "They're going to charge!"

Once again, Xiang Shu had to pick Chen Xing up, clasping him under his arms as he leaped across roofs and vaulted over walls with Feng Qianjun. Chen Xing was practically facing the wind with tears streaming down his face. *When will I be able to find the Dinghai Pearl and recover my magic? Waahhh!* He had been dragging Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun down the whole way!

Still, Chen Xing tried his best to answer Xiang Shu's questions while they fled. "Living corpses are the lowest level. These shadow warriors may have powered up through cultivation, so they aren't as afraid of the light. The general is their boss, and it has demonic powers too. If not for the Silence of All Magic, the Heart Lamp could definitely deal with them, but that's not possible right now, so…" He paused. "Wait, cultivation! I get it! That's why the living corpses are being reared in the mirror Chang'an City! The enemy is coming up with ways to refine them!"

Ordinary living corpses—those with the least combat strength—made up the bulk of their enemies in this world. There were hundreds of thousands of them, if not more. Next in rank were the shadow warriors. It seemed that the plentiful, dense resentment within the mirror was nourishing these living corpses and gradually strengthening them.

If they hadn't discovered this secret mirror world in time, this place would have become home to an army of shadow warriors—hundreds of

thousands of soldiers who didn’t fear death or pain and knew nothing but slaughter!

Buzz! Chen Xing felt like he had once again passed through an invisible wall. The three of them jumped down from Weiyang Palace’s outer wall and landed in the imperial garden.

“Got it. Find the mirror,” Xiang Shu said. “Feng Qianjun, let’s split up to search for it.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Feng Qianjun protested. “Give me some time. Let me finish reading this bamboo slip.”

“Can’t you read it when we get back?”

“It might help!”

Chen Xing motioned to Xiang Shu to let Feng Qianjun give it a try, so Xiang Shu dropped it. He gestured for Chen Xing to follow Feng Qianjun; he, Xiang Shu, would search for the mirror world’s manifestation of the Yin Yang Mirror. Feng Qianjun entered a hall, unfurled the bamboo slip, and sat down in front of a bronze mirror to study it carefully.

Chen Xing knew that the cultivation method for the Saber of Harmony and Life was written on the slip. The saber was the Feng family’s heirloom, so it resonated with the bloodline of Feng Qianjun’s family. The bamboo slip recorded secret arts used to guide one’s internal force through the body’s meridians to absorb the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth, then transfer it to the divine weapon. Feng Qianjun had been practicing martial arts since he was young, so he was as familiar with this as anyone could possibly be, but…

“Right now,” Chen Xing cautioned him, “the most important component—the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth—is missing. Even if you do learn how to wield the Harmony Saber, you won’t be able to awaken its power.”

“But it won’t hurt to give it a try,” Feng Qianjun said. “What if it works?”

The truth was a blow that Chen Xing couldn’t bear to deal him.

With his left hand, Feng Qianjun pressed each of the meridians on his right arm in turn. “Could you use the Heart Lamp’s power to help me, like how you assisted the Great Chanyu?”

“It’s…a bit of a mystery.”

“Where does the mystery lie?”

“It lies in the fact that the Heart Lamp doesn’t seem to want to connect with you. I can’t do anything about it, either.”

Just then, Chen Xing heard hooves striking the ground outside—the army, that dense mass of living corpses, had already surrounded the whole palace. Xiang Shu hadn’t found the Yin Yang Mirror, but the defensive formation was still active, so in theory, their enemies would not be able to charge them just yet. What he feared, though, was that they would repeat their previous tactic and blast them with tens of thousands of arrows again.

The palace’s bricks and tiles were sturdier than those of the Exorcism Department, but he didn’t know how long they would last.

“The Saber of Harmony and Life. They were two weapons at first,” Feng Qianjun said solemnly. “One was called Harmony and the other was called Life. They were only cast into one later on. My ancestors chose to build the Xifeng Bank on Mount Song because they wanted to guard the Exorcism Department that once existed there.”

Chen Xing could see Feng Qianjun’s resolve and that he was unlikely to be dissuaded. Instead of trying, Chen Xing asked, “Did your brother know that the Yin Yang Mirror was in the storeroom?”

Feng Qianjun finished reading the bamboo slip and put it aside. “He knew everything. He was the one who activated the Yin Yang Mirror and threw us into the mirror world.”

This news astonished Chen Xing. Feng Qianjun sighed. “Fu Jian already knows,” Chen Xing said, trying to comfort him. “He just doesn’t want to lay a finger on you guys until he’s obtained enough evidence. You should go back and dissuade him. I have to retrieve the Yin Yang Mirror, then think of a way to eliminate the resentment in it.”

Feng Qianjun left five fingers pressed down on the meridians of his right arm for a moment longer, then pressed on a series of spots in front of his shoulder, on his chest, and on his lower abdomen. He got up, drew the Harmony Saber, and tried brandishing it horizontally.

“Let me try,” he insisted.

Chen Xing didn’t believe that Feng Qianjun could awaken the saber under such circumstances, but Feng Qianjun stood holding his blade horizontally in front of him, wielding it with his right hand while stroking slowly across the blade with his left. An invisible flow of yin energy seemed to stir in the air like wind.

“This…wait!” Chen Xing cried. “Stop! Feng-xiong!”

Chen Xing’s soul had fled his body in terror, but here was the answer: the Harmony Saber *could* be awakened. The problem was that when Feng Qianjun utilized his art, there was no way to harness the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth…so what would take its place? The resentment that was so abundant in the mirror world! If resentment was introduced into the Harmony Saber, there was no telling what might happen next!

Chen Xing wanted to seize the saber, but Feng Qianjun turned a deaf ear. The black flames surrounding him soared into the air, spinning around rapidly and winding around his body, blocking Chen Xing from getting close. A second later, Feng Qianjun cried out in pain, and his eyes turned bloodshot. The yin energy wind engulfed him as he howled in anguish.

“This is resentment!” Chen Xing shouted. “You’ll suffer a backlash!”

Everything happening around him was utterly overwhelming, but Chen Xing managed to recall that one of the uses of the Heart Lamp was to expel demons. He was just lighting up his Heart Lamp when he saw Xiang Shu rush to the fore of the hall.

Chen Xing yelled, “Stop him! Protector! No, no, don’t use your sword! You’ll kill him!”

Xiang Shu was forced to switch weapons. He lifted up a table with one hand and slammed it harshly against Feng Qianjun’s back. Feng Qianjun returned the hit with his blade. Xiang Shu unsheathed his heavy

iron sword and met the Harmony Saber head-on. Feng Qianjun dropped the long blade at once, and it fell to the ground with a clang.

There was no time to waste. “Expel!” shouted Chen Xing, emitting a scorching light with one hand. He pressed it against Feng Qianjun’s forehead, the white light blasting in.

Feng Qianjun fell to his knees. His gaze steadied, and a bewildered expression crossed his face.

Chen Xing was so frightened that he choked; for a very brief moment, he’d thought Feng Qianjun would lose control. “You were almost corrupted!”

“What happened this time?” Xiang Shu said in disbelief.

“I don’t know,” Chen Xing said. “Well, I do know, but I’ll talk about it later. Have you found it?”

Xiang Shu turned around and walked out. Chen Xing snatched up the Saber of Harmony and Life, pulled Feng Qianjun to his feet, and chased after him. They passed through a long corridor and finally arrived in the main hall. In front of the emperor’s throne sat a wooden frame with a simple mirror inside it—the Yin Yang Mirror!

Chen Xing rushed forward to check, while Xiang Shu studied Feng Qianjun doubtfully. Feng Qianjun waved his hand to signal that he was fine. He held out a hand, so Xiang Shu took the saber from Chen Xing and handed it to him.

“For a moment just now,” Feng Qianjun said, “it was as if there was a voice next to my ear that kept saying, ‘Kill, kill, kill…’” Xiang Shu frowned, watching him, and Feng Qianjun nodded. “I…just wanted to find something to kill and enjoy myself. Is that what being corrupted feels like?”

“You have obsession in your heart,” Chen Xing explained as he inspected the Yin Yang Mirror. “Resentment can take advantage of it. Resentment is flourishing in the world, and over time, it will breed demons, which can control your heart and magnify the obsession in it. By the end, you would be trapped in an endless cycle of slaughter, never to break free for all eternity. That’s what it means to be ‘corrupted.’”

Feng Qianjun covered his forehead with an outstretched hand, pressing against his temples with his thumb and middle finger. “Fortunately, your Heart Lamp woke me like a lightning strike.”

“It happened so suddenly. I’d just read in a book that the Heart Lamp can temporarily expel resentment. Anyway, you—”

Xiang Shu understood the rough shape of what had happened.

Suddenly, they heard a boom, and the entire hall began to shake. Arrows clattered into the tiles above.

“Can we get out of here?” Xiang Shu said. “We’re running out of time!”

“I’ll try.” Chen Xing rolled his sleeves up. “I can’t guarantee that it’ll succeed. The Yin Yang Mirror is a magical artifact that is driven by resentment. To activate it, I must accept the resentment. When I pick it up to use it, the defensive formation outside will disappear, so the two of you will have to protect me.”

“Can’t you just leave it where it is when you use it?” Xiang Shu asked. “Do you have to pick it up?”

“No, I can’t! Are you sure you want me to explain right now?”

“Hurry!” Feng Qianjun interjected. “Stop fighting! The top of the hall is about to collapse!”

“Do it, do it!” Xiang Shu said impatiently.

The tiles over the main hall of Weiyang Palace were falling apart, layer by layer. Chen Xing took a deep breath. This would be his first time using magic since he left the mountain… No, it was his first time using magic, period. Emitting light didn’t count. He had often read ancient texts about exorcists using magical artifacts to move about freely both in the sky and on the earth. Now that it was his turn, he felt queasy with nerves.

Both of Chen Xing’s palms lit up with white light. He turned his left palm over to act as the yang side and clenched his right hand to form the yin side. He silently recited incantations as he circled his hands around the Yin Yang Mirror, telling himself that he had to succeed.

The Yin Yang Mirror reacted instantly. A winding black vapor burst forth and slowly coiled around his palms!

It works! Chen Xing thought. However, where the Heart Lamp's magic was crystal clear, the resentment in the Yin Yang Mirror was extremely murky. The two energies were incompatible, and they began to resist each other. The black vapor from the Yin Yang Mirror spread all over Chen Xing's body and engulfed him in a ruthless black flame.

Watching on, Feng Qianjun and Xiang Shu saw his eyes turn blood red.

"Are you okay?" Feng Qianjun said. "Tianchi!"

Countless noises rang in Chen Xing's ears, the clearest of which was his own voice: *Why? Why…must I only have four years left to live? Why me…?*

Something wasn't right. Xiang Shu called out to him: "Chen Xing!"

Chen Xing was shocked back to his senses, and he gathered the Heart Lamp's light, forming a warm, bright shield to guard his heart.

"Go!" Chen Xing shouted, and withdrew both hands. He thought he grasped the knack of using resentment to control the artifact, and he began to manipulate it. The Yin Yang Mirror rose into the air, spewing black flames, and started revolving high up in the hall. Strange runes appeared all around it.

Weiyang Palace's main entrance collapsed. They could hear it from where they stood.

"How much longer?" Feng Qianjun shouted.

"I! DON'T! KNOW!" Chen Xing roared. "I don't want to answer any more questions from either of you!"

Chapter 21

THE GROUND TREMBLED. Xiang Shu charged out of the hall first, both hands wrapped around the sword with its point hanging downward. Feng Qianjun followed, and was alarmed to find a massive army flattening the threshold of the hall.

“Hold them off!” Xiang Shu shouted. He turned around, grabbed the main hall’s massive, red lacquer door, which weighed almost half a ton, and yanked it off its hinges.

“Wow! We’re taking the door with us!” Chen Xing cried.

Xiang Shu shoved his shoulder against the door and sent it flying toward the drill ground outside the hall. Feng Qianjun yelled, but his voice was drowned out by the cacophony of the charging warriors. What happened next was unfortunately predictable: the shadow warriors swept Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun up in their charge, separating them and forcing them to fight their respective battles alone.

Chen Xing, still in the palace, was floating, the flames of resentment revolving around him. He cupped his left hand over his chest, protecting his heart meridian and the weak flame of the Heart Lamp, and raised his right hand with his finger pointing at the sky. The Yin Yang Mirror rotated faster and faster until finally, a ring of light shot out from it. The runes that had appeared around the mirror, bursting with a purplish black light, returned to the mirror one by one.

In present-day Chang’an, it was late into the night. Fu Jian was in his imperial study, deep in discussion with Wang Ziye.

“How do We get Shulü Kong to willingly hand over the Purple Scroll?” he asked.

“Why doesn’t Your Majesty give him a direct order?” said Wang Ziye. “Why beat around the bush? As an official, presenting the Purple Scroll to his sovereign is part of his duty.”

Fu Jian paused for a moment. “We admit that you are right. It’s just that…”

“Would he dare to defy your order?”

“If We were to be forceful,” Fu Jian said, smiling, “he really might be that bold.”

“I remember a time, not so long ago, when Your Majesty would show no mercy to anyone, Hu or Han, who dared disobey an imperial order.”

“The Great Chanyu must not be harmed.”

“Must not be harmed? He’s merely an official.”

“He’s not an official. He’s the Great Chanyu.”

“Just as there cannot be two suns in the sky, there cannot be two kings in one country. All of the land under the heavens belongs to the emperor, and all of the people are the emperor’s servants. If the Great Chanyu is not an imperial subject, then what is he?” These words gave Fu Jian pause, and Wang Ziye smiled. “The Ancient Chi Le Covenant belongs in the past. The ancient covenant, the Great Chanyu, the Purple Scroll of Golden Conferment… In my humble opinion, none of these need to exist anymore. If Your Majesty is bold enough, you can do away with them.”

Fu Jian shook his head. “It’s not the right time for that. At least, not yet.”

Had Wang Meng still lived, he would never try to persuade Fu Jian to follow such a course of action. *Wang Ziye is no Wang Meng after all*, Fu Jian thought.

It all seemed so dull. He decided that he would entertain Wang Ziye for a few sentences longer before sending him away.

Inside his sleeping chambers, on the table in front of Princess Qinghe, the Yin Yang Mirror began to rattle, and bursts of black fog erupted from its surface.

In the mirror world, Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun had been pushed back until they were outside the doorway to the hall.

“Still not done?!” Xiang Shu demanded. “Hurry up!”

Chen Xing ignored him. With his eyes squeezed shut, he directed the Yin Yang Mirror to rotate, spinning it faster and faster in place.

“We can’t hold them back any longer!” shouted Feng Qianjun.

He and Xiang Shu stood guard in front of the hall’s entrance. They had already beheaded countless shadow warriors, but even headless, the warriors crawled around on the ground, found their heads, and reconnected them to their necks. In the blink of an eye, they were as good as new, and they rushed back into the fray to try to slay Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun all over again.

Feng Qianjun was struggling. He made up his mind. “Great Chanyu! Get into the hall! Leave me! Both of you should go! As many of us should try to escape as possible!”

The shadow general rallied its troops again, preparing for the next wave of the assault. Feng Qianjun gritted his teeth and brandished the Saber of Harmony and Life. Black flames erupted all over his body.

“What are you doing?” Xiang Shu asked in disbelief.

In an instant, Feng Qianjun had drawn the world’s resentment toward him. The air around him rippled, and a bloody glint flashed in his eye.

“Go back and stop my brother,” Feng Qianjun said slowly, and then his eyes went scarlet. The black flames grew, taking over the sky, then poured into the Saber of Harmony and Life. A gust of evil wind blew past, and a black light burst out from the tip of the blade.

The power of harmony and life gives rise to all living beings, shifting even the stars and constellations above!

The sacred saber, missing for almost three hundred years, was back—but it was engulfed in the raging flames of resentment. Gone was the bitingly cold glare that had glinted off the blade; now it reflected a darkness even more profound than that of a long winter’s night. The sacred saber had transformed into a demonic blade. When Feng Qianjun slashed with it, the blade’s death-soaked energy dealt a brutal blow to a shadow warrior that had charged ahead.

The shadow warriors' formation broke in an instant. Feng Qianjun let out an angry roar, took the Saber of Harmony and Life in both hands, and stabbed it point-first into the ground.

A black ring of light swept outward from where the blade lodged and expanded rapidly in all directions. Wherever the ring touched, plants and trees withered, and the land turned black. Then, as the ring approached the army, the ground swelled, crumbling brick walls as if they were chalk. When at last it reached its target, the ring sent the entire army flying.

It was as if a sleeping giant had arched its back in a stretch. The trees wove their roots together to produce a spike as large as a dragon. The roots rose into the air, weaving and twisting and dancing, until they filled the entirety of the drill grounds. Meanwhile, in Weiyang Palace and throughout the city, millions of dead trees uprooted themselves to launch a large-scale attack on the army of living corpses.

"Feng Qianjun!" Xiang Shu shouted. "Stop!"

Pitch-black vines twined around one another and began to seal off the entrance to the hall. Xiang Shu drew his sword and swung it at the saber in Feng Qianjun's hands.

In that same moment, with a flash of the Heart Lamp, Chen Xing completed the spell.

The Yin Yang Mirror created a whirlwind of tremendous strength, and Chen Xing quickly came back to himself. He glanced at what Xiang Shu was doing, and before he could think it through, he pushed both his hands forward. Nine runes lit up along Xiang Shu's heavy sword, shining with a radiant white light. That light struck the Saber of Harmony and Life in Feng Qianjun's hands and sent it flying.

The bloody glint in Feng Qianjun's eyes vanished, and before they could move, the three of them were yanked off their feet and back toward the mirror. Xiang Shu twisted around in midair, managing to wrap his arms around Chen Xing a split second before the two of them were pulled in. Feng Qianjun shouted as he too was drawn into the mirror, and the Saber of Harmony and Life flew after him.

Absent of the resentment that drove them, the vines that sealed the entrance exploded, and their remains vanished without a trace. All that lingered was the mess strewn over the ground. The black flames were sucked back into the Yin Yang Mirror, which fell to the ground with a clang. It rolled out of the hall and came to a stop at the base of the steps.

The black-armored general dismounted, strode over, and picked up the Yin Yang Mirror.

Chen Xing yelled and tucked himself into Xiang Shu's front, but this time, Xiang Shu was prepared. When the Yin Yang Mirror ejected them, he split-stepped and turned, bending his left leg and kicking out with his right as he landed on the wall. He crouched to absorb the momentum that would have carried him through the wall, and then somersaulted through the air to land on the ground.

"Aaahh!" Chen Xing was still screaming.

A second later, the Yin Yang Mirror spat Feng Qianjun out. He crashed loudly into a pillar and collapsed to the ground, limp. The Saber of Harmony and Life came flying after him, tumbling end over end before it lodged itself into a beam in the hall.

Fu Jian and Wang Ziye, still in the imperial study, heard the commotion at the same time. Fu Jian leaped up and dashed to the sleeping chambers, Wang Ziye following close behind.

As Xiang Shu landed, he lifted his sword in a defensive stance—then he realized that the person standing before them was Princess Qinghe, and he breathed a sigh of relief. She held the Yin Yang Mirror in her hands, staring wide-eyed at the three of them.

Chen Xing's head was still spinning. "Where are we? Huh. Why are we here? Princess? You… Why do you have the mirror?"

"You two have been missing for nearly a whole day!" Princess Qinghe said. "His Majesty was so worried he dispatched search parties to find you, but they came up empty. This mirror somehow showed up instead."

Princess Qinghe frowned deeply, first at the Yin Yang Mirror in her hands and then at Chen Xing and Xiang Shu. Xiang Shu sheathed his sword and Chen Xing took a few deep breaths before walking toward Princess Qinghe.

Princess Qinghe was still in shock. “You… You…”

“Give me the mirror,” Chen Xing said. “I’ll explain everything later.”

She approached Chen Xing and handed the mirror to him. “How did you…escape from the mirror?”

Suddenly, Chen Xing realized that something was wrong. Xiang Shu shouted, “Duck!” and Chen Xing ducked, but Princess Qinghe was faster than him. Her left hand, the one that held the mirror, snaked around his ribs and up until her arm was looped around his neck.

It was Chen Xing’s turn to be stunned. Xiang Shu took a quick step forward, but he saw that Princess Qinghe’s body wasn’t moving.

Black qi manifested around her and struck Xiang Shu harshly in the chest. It hit him so hard that he went flying several yards backward and landed on the ground. Feng Qianjun still lay unconscious from when the mirror had spat him out, his Saber of Harmony and Life firmly lodged in the pillar; the only person who could stop Princess Qinghe now was Xiang Shu.

Princess Qinghe had caught Chen Xing with his guard down. Not even Xiang Shu was prepared for this. He had been struck right on his injured rib, but he gritted his teeth against the sharp pain, grabbed his sword, and staggered to stand firmly on his feet.

A dagger appeared in Princess Qinghe’s right hand, and she pressed it against Chen Xing’s neck. “It’s cold!” Chen Xing shrieked like he had gone mad. “Aahhh! This dagger’s so cold!”

Princess Qinghe and Xiang Shu both stared at him, speechless.

“Couldn’t you have heated it up before placing it against my neck?!” said Chen Xing.

“Great Chanyu,” Princess Qinghe spat, “remain at least five steps away from me at all times. And don’t you dare move. I know how skilled you are.”

As she spoke, her dagger bit lightly into Chen Xing’s neck. The dagger had been infused with mana and its blade was pitch-black. If she pressed down just a little harder, the dagger would go right through Chen Xing’s throat, and blood would spurt out. It would be the end of him.

“Ow! *Ow!*” Chen Xing yelped. “It hurts! Jiejie, don’t be so rough! We’re all people of honor he—”

Princess Qinghe tightened the arm she had wrapped around his neck. “Shut up!”

“It was you who raised the army of living corpses,” Xiang Shu said darkly. “What are you up to? What’s your relationship with the Feng family?”

Princess Qinghe took a deep breath. “Great Chanyu, you’re too much of a busybody. You two stumbled into this situation on your own; you can’t blame me for that. If you hadn’t bothered with this kid, you wouldn’t have had to deal with so much trouble.”

“So you *were* the one who sent the assassin that night,” Xiang Shu said in a dangerous tone. “And here I was wondering why Jiantou would want to kill an exorcist he had no grudge against.”

Princess Qinghe was still strangling Chen Xing. All he could think about was her extraordinary strength. She was still nowhere near Xiang Shu’s level, but it was clear that she was an accomplished martial artist.

“You—I knew—” Chen Xing could barely breathe. “You were so eager to act as my matchmaker. I knew you had to be harboring ill intentions.”

Princess Qinghe tightened her grip around his neck and sneered. “Now, you die!”

A black cloud erupted from her body, enveloping her and Chen Xing, and she floated off her feet. Her arm did not loosen, instead yanking Chen

Xing’s neck upward. He couldn’t say a word, on the verge of losing the last of his air.

“Name your conditions,” Xiang Shu said darkly.

“Put down your sword, raise both your hands, and back up until you’re outside the door,” Princess Qinghe told him.

Xiang Shu turned around. He went to the entrance of the hall, set down his heavy sword, raised both hands, and slowly retreated. Princess Qinghe’s grip loosened slightly, and Chen Xing clung to her arm.

“Protector, be careful not to trip over the doorway behind you,” Chen Xing said, trying to help Xiang Shu even while he was being held hostage. Xiang Shu stared at him in disbelief.

As soon as Xiang Shu stepped over the threshold, Princess Qinghe shouted, “Guards! There’s an assassin! Guards!”

Fu Jian had never liked having people guard his door while he slept, so all the guards were out patrolling the imperial garden and the corridors, but they headed for the sleeping quarters as soon as they heard Princess Qinghe’s voice. Everything was happening so quickly—in the time between Xiang Shu and Chen Xing flying out of the mirror and Princess Qinghe turning hostile, they’d barely had the chance to exchange a few sentences.

“Hurry up and run,” Chen Xing told Xiang Shu. “You can come back to save me later!”

In that moment, multiple thoughts ran through Xiang Shu’s mind. If he left, Princess Qinghe would stab Chen Xing to death at once. It was clear to him now that Princess Qinghe, Feng Qianyi, and the mysterious figures behind the living corpse conspiracy were all part of the same group—it was likely that Princess Qinghe and Feng Qianyi were the masterminds.

Chen Xing tried motioning with his eyes for Xiang Shu to leave when suddenly, the dog, who had been sleeping behind the screen, darted out and bit Princess Qinghe on the ankle.

Princess Qinghe cried out. Chen Xing struggled to break free of her grip, and Xiang Shu ducked, lunging to grab his heavy sword before

spinning around. Princess Qinghe flung the dog into the air and slashed it with her dagger just as Xiang Shu's heavy sword swung down on her.

Chen Xing saw Princess Qinghe hold up the Yin Yang Mirror and realized she must have had a way to activate it, so he lit up his Heart Lamp to help Xiang Shu break through the resentment, crying, "Break!" The heavy sword in Xiang Shu's hands glowed with a blinding light that drove back the black fog like a flame melting snow. As the white light approached Princess Qinghe, dread was clear on her face.

Xiang Shu had been caught unprepared and suffered because of it; he wouldn't underestimate her again. With this attack, either he or she had to die, so he put all his might into his sword. The instant the Heart Lamp's light broke through the black energy, Xiang Shu impaled Princess Qinghe's chest with the sword, yanked it out, and struck her again at a slanted, downward angle. Her ribs shattered, blood spewed from her mouth, nose and eyes, and she slammed into a wall. The Yin Yang Mirror flew from her hand and clattered to the ground.

Fu Jian arrived on the scene just in time to witness Xiang Shu killing Princess Qinghe with his sword.

Everyone was stunned; even Xiang Shu paused. When the black energy had cleared, Princess Qinghe lost all strength to resist, and Xiang Shu already knew that something was wrong when he unleashed his second strike. The third strike was interlinked with the first two, however, and he already had her cornered. It was too late to pull back.

"She…she…" Chen Xing rushed forward. "Wait!"

Princess Qinghe lay on the ground, her lips slightly parted, her mouth full of blood. "I just wanted…to avenge…the Murong clan…"

Chen Xing raised his head and looked blankly at Xiang Shu. Shielding Chen Xing with his body, Xiang Shu turned around at once to face Fu Jian, who was standing outside the hall. Tuoba Yan was with him, bearing a torch, along with a group of guards.

The dog whimpered and crawled to Chen Xing, leaving a trail of blood behind it. It struggled to lick his hand. Chen Xing picked the dog up, and a chill ran down his spine. For a moment, he felt like he had fallen into an ice cave.

“Xiang Shu?” Chen Xing asked. They were in deep trouble now. He wasn’t sure whether Fu Jian had arrived in time to see Princess Qinghe enveloped in the mass of black energy, but even if he had, the lighting in the hall was dim and he couldn’t have seen it clearly.

Xiang Shu snapped out of the trance he had fallen into upon Qinghe’s death. He looked at Fu Jian warily. “Do you want to listen to an explanation, or will you jump straight to vengeance? Either way, I will see this through to its end.”

Fu Jian seemed to hear none of it. He let out a heartrending wail of pure grief and lunged for Xiang Shu bare-handed.

Outside the sleeping chambers, Xiang Shu carried Chen Xing in his arms, while Chen Xing held the dog. They smashed through a wooden window and fell into the imperial garden in a shower of debris.

Arrows soared through the air. Fu Jian rushed through the hole they’d made, but it was too late: all he could see was Xiang Shu’s receding figure, carrying Chen Xing as they vaulted over the palace walls. Above them, the dawn sky was just beginning to turn milky white.

“Shulü Kong!” Fu Jian roared, overcome with grief. He had lost all semblance of rational thought. “We swear on Our life that you will pay for every drop of blood you have spilled!”

Chapter 22

IN THE GARDEN of a high-ranking Chang'an official's residence, Xiang Shu coughed a few times.

Chen Xing was still in a state of panic. He glanced at Xiang Shu, who was breathing deeply as he looked beyond the high wall. Chen Xing gently released the puppy; Princess Qinghe's dagger was still embedded in its chest, and the little body was already cold. With a pang of sorrow, he closed the puppy's eyes and set it down behind a rock. Xiang Shu leaned against the corner of the wall with his eyes closed, exhausted.

The morning light was gently warming the garden, and the distant sound of a bell indicated that it was daytime in Chang'an City. Somehow, they had managed to sneak into this residence by scaling the high wall. The servants of the large estate had begun their day, and elderly women chatted as they prepared to clean the courtyard.

"Shift in a little more," Chen Xing whispered. "You'll be seen."

One of Xiang Shu's legs was still outside the rock garden, and he didn't respond. Chen Xing, worried, made to tug him in. When his hand touched Xiang Shu's shoulder, he felt something wet and was startled to see blood when he pulled it back.

"Why are you bleeding so much?!"

"Shut up," Xiang Shu said finally.

Chen Xing hurriedly turned Xiang Shu over to examine his back. During their escape from the palace, Xiang Shu had used his back as a shield and had been struck by several arrows. The imperial army's arrows had a special blood groove carved into them, making their removal urgent.

Hearing noise from the woodshed in the backyard, Chen Xing looked up and saw a servant emerging with firewood. Once the coast was clear, Chen Xing quickly dragged Xiang Shu into the woodshed, shut the door, and started using a dagger to extract the arrowheads.

His old wounds hadn’t healed yet, and now he had new ones. By the time he was done, Chen Xing’s hands were covered in blood. He peeked through a crack in the door, then hurried outside to wash his hands and fetch some water for Xiang Shu to drink.

“What do we do?” Chen Xing murmured, anxious. Once they were settled, he said, “This is bad. We killed Princess Qinghe right in front of Fu Jian.”

Xiang Shu remained silent.

Chen Xing sat cross-legged. “That last strike…”

Faster than he could blink, Chen Xing found his neck in Xiang Shu’s tight grip. He couldn’t speak. Then Xiang Shu pushed him aside, growling, “You were being held hostage. If I hadn’t acted decisively, you wouldn’t even be alive right now.”

Xiang Shu was furious. Chen Xing, meanwhile, had no way of knowing in advance that Princess Qinghe had been colluding with that mysterious group. Judging by the black flames, she might have been affected by resentment too. But she was dead now, and further discussion was pointless.

“Sober up!” Chen Xing snapped. “You can’t blame me for that!”

“If it weren’t for you, she wouldn’t have died!” Xiang Shu bellowed, incandescent with rage.

“Then kill me, if you want revenge! Go ahead!”

They locked eyes in tense silence. Chen Xing understood that Xiang Shu was just venting his frustration, that he regretted using excessive force because he misjudged his opponent’s strength. However, from what they had seen, it was clear that Princess Qinghe had already been consumed by resentment and was colluding with the mysterious group. If Xiang Shu had been captured, the conspirators would have shown Chen Xing no mercy.

Chen Xing regained his composure. “Feng Qianyi, Princess Qinghe… Who will be next?”

Xiang Shu calmed down at last and closed his eyes.

“We won’t be able to clear our names even if we jump into the Yellow Springs,”[31] Chen Xing said. “Fu Jian must be searching the entire city for us by now. We still don’t know who else was working with Princess Qinghe, and the Yin Yang Mirror is still in the palace. I’m worried they might even kill Feng-dage…”

At last, Xiang Shu spoke. “She wanted to take revenge for the Murong clan,” he said slowly. “Ever since the Great Yan was destroyed by Fu Jian, that was her goal. I just don’t know how she managed to partner up with the Feng family.”

That was right. That was what Princess Qinghe had stammered before she died.

Xiang Shu closed his eyes again. “It’s a pity she was born a woman,” he murmured. “A beauty on horseback, her skills in mounted archery no less than a man’s, but now she can never return to the prairie…”

Chen Xing thought back to the things Princess Qinghe had said, and the way she smiled. From what he had seen over the past few days, it was clear that Xiang Shu and Princess Qinghe had shared a deep bond. “Xiang Shu?” he asked.

Xiang Shu remained silent.

“I’m sorry,” Chen Xing said softly.

“It has nothing to do with you,” Xiang Shu replied tonelessly, his eyes still closed.

The room fell silent again. “I’ll go see what’s going on outside,” whispered Chen Xing.

“Don’t go anywhere,” Xiang Shu’s cold voice cut in. “Stay here. I will sleep for a short while. I’m too tired…”

Chen Xing was equally exhausted, but he was troubled. They had no way of knowing Feng Qianjun’s fate, and they were facing the prospect of Fu Jian’s wrath; interrogation through torture seemed inevitable. They needed to find a way to save Feng Qianjun as soon as possible. The more pressing issue, however, was the safety of the Feng family. It was already too late to warn them.

How many more people would have to die over this? Chen Xing was restless, but Xiang Shu slept as if nothing had happened. Chen Xing wanted to venture out to gather information, but he knew that without Xiang Shu's help, he probably wouldn't even make it off of the main street unscathed, so he had no choice but to stay put.

He reached into his front lapels for the bamboo slip, but it was gone. Chen Xing was certain he hadn't dropped it while fleeing—items from the mirror world must have been impossible to bring into the present.

Exhausted and utterly defeated, Chen Xing clutched the lifeless dog in his arms. He leaned against a stack of firewood and, lost in thought, eventually fell asleep. While he was unconscious, his head slipped and fell against Xiang Shu. Xiang Shu, still holding his sword, stirred slightly from his deep slumber. Once he was satisfied that there were no enemies around, he placed his right hand gently on Chen Xing's shoulder.

It was destined to be the most tumultuous day the nation had seen since the day Fu Jian killed his older brother, Fu Sheng. The entire city of Chang'an was blockaded; entry was allowed, but exit was prohibited. Despite severe orders to suppress the news of Princess Qinghe's death at the hands of the Great Chanyu, word spread like wildfire. By the time the morning market opened two hours later, everyone in the streets and alleys knew about it.

This was the first time since Fu Jian's destruction of the Yan state that an event shook all levels of society in Chang'an. The former officials of the fallen nation—Murong Chui, the governor of Jingzhao who had surrendered to Fu Jian; Murong Ping, the governor of Fanyang who had come to the capital to report to the emperor; and Murong Wei, the Shangshu—all sought an audience with Fu Jian as soon as dawn broke. Members of the Xianbei Murong clan, the Tuoba clan (with which the Murongs had marital ties), and the Qiang people (who had long maintained close relations with the Murong family) knelt outside the hall.

The imperial court of the Great Qin was in chaos. In a certain sense, Princess Qinghe had symbolized the connection between the Murong clan and the ruling Fu Jian. After the death of Empress Gou, Fu Jian did not appoint a new empress, and Princess Qinghe had effectively led his imperial

harem. Fu Jian even refused to accept any new concubines due to his relationship with Qinghe and her brother, Murong Chong. Yet she had been killed without warning by the Great Chanyu, Shulü Kong. Fu Jian was now compelled to provide an explanation to his civil and military officials.

The entire Murong clan was shocked when they received the news. Yet beneath their stunned surface, they questioned Fu Jian, seeming more vigilant than ever. Fu Jian was familiar with that particular kind of wary expression; he had seen it many times before.

“We are currently pursuing the Great Chanyu.” Fu Jian’s eyes were bloodshot, and he looked utterly worn out, as if he had aged ten years overnight. “The events of last night are fraught with complications, and We have not yet grasped the full picture. The Great Chanyu fled to escape arrest, and only he can provide the answers We seek.”

The descendants of the noble Xianbei clan stood silent in the court. Not a sound could be heard. Only the Yuwen family, who had a long-standing grudge against the Murong clan, showed a slight hint of satisfaction at their misfortune.

“Your Majesty,” Minister Murong Wei inquired, “where were you when the tragedy occurred?”

Murong Chui remained silent. He wore an iron mask, his profile having been scarred by flames during the battle at Xiangyang City several months ago.

“What are you implying?” Fu Jian thundered. “Are you accusing Us of being an accomplice?!”

Everyone below the steps displayed clear signs of distrust. The Great Chanyu, Shulü Kong, had been causing unrest throughout the city ever since he arrived in Chang’an. It had long been common knowledge in the court that Fu Jian was apprehensive about Shulü Kong. The influence the Ancient Chi Le Covenant held over Fu Jian, combined with the growing closeness of the two parties, made various groups in Chang’an uneasy. They feared that more northern nomadic tribes might cross the pass and demand a share of the rewards they had earned from the destruction of their country.

At length, Murong Chui said, “Your Majesty, I heard that two Han assassins were present in addition to Shulü Kong. One of them escaped with him from Weiyang Palace, while the other, who is detained in the palace, is the youngest son of the Feng family from Xifeng Bank. Is this true?!”

“Why would the Great Chanyu collude with a group of Han?” Murong Wei said in disbelief.

Fu Jian elected not to answer the question directly. “Tuoba Yan has already led the imperial guards to surround Mount Song. The Feng clan did indeed flee to avoid arrest; the entire family left the city overnight.”

Someone in the crowd could not endure it any longer. “Where is he? Hand him over!”

“How brazen!” Wang Ziye said, chastising him on Fu Jian’s behalf.

“We cannot hand him over to you,” said Fu Jian. “We are in the process of interrogating him and will provide an explanation within three days. Your pain is great, but the pain We feel is even greater. Go back and think it through clearly, and calm down. This court session is dismissed.”

Fu Jian had just lost his beloved. He no longer had the patience to deal with how rude the Murong family was being. That afternoon, however, the military forces in Chang’an City mobilized on the grounds that the Great Chanyu, Shulü Kong, was plotting a rebellion. But Shulü Kong was alone in Chang’an, and the Ancient Chi Le Covenant’s army was beyond the Great Wall. Any keen-eyed person would see that even if Shulü Kong issued a call to arms to overthrow the incapable ruler and secure the land within the pass, it would take the army at least ten days to reach Chang’an, even at their fastest. They couldn’t accomplish this great feat any sooner than that, much less purge the nation of traitors and support the Jin clan. So, who was Fu Jian really guarding against?

The only plausible answer was the Murong clan.

Chen Xing pushed the door of the woodshed open a crack and looked outside. This family was unusually quiet, which worried Chen Xing a bit. Had the palace somehow managed to suppress the news?

Xiang Shu hadn’t lost a great deal of blood, so his complexion soon improved. He got up with his sword strapped to his back.

“What do we do next?” Chen Xing asked as they passed through the corridor. Even though it was a large residence, there was no one in the back. When they reached the kitchen, they found that breakfast had been prepared inside.

“I need to meet Jiantou once to confirm his safety,” said Xiang Shu, “then think of a way to save Feng Qianjun. If Princess Qinghe harbored a desire for revenge, she must have been nurturing it for a long time. We don’t know how many people are in that group, and if a cornered dog is driven to desperation, Jiantou need not worry about revenge—he may not even keep his life. We have to get ready as soon as possible.”

With Xiang Shu’s degree of martial prowess, Chen Xing knew that once he hid himself in the shadows, no one would be able to touch him. Even if his attack didn’t succeed, he would be able to retreat unscathed. If Xiang Shu took Chen Xing along for the ride, however, the outcome was much less certain.

“I…” Chen Xing began. Xiang Shu shot him a confused glance. “I won’t come with you, I’d slow you down.” He was troubled. Xiang Shu wouldn’t have been shot the night before if he hadn’t been protecting him.

“You’ll wait here?” Xiang Shu asked.

“I’ll try to think of another way.”

Xiang Shu remained silent, seriously considering Chen Xing’s suggestion. But then Chen Xing had second thoughts.

“What if Fu Jian doesn’t believe you?” he asked. “Should we find the Yin Yang Mirror and let him take a look at it himself?”

“If he wants to believe me, he’ll believe anything I say,” Xiang Shu said plainly. “If he doesn’t, then he won’t believe me no matter what we show him.”

Chen Xing couldn’t argue with that. Xiang Shu pushed open the woodshed door and stepped outside. The sunlight was so glaring that Chen Xing could barely keep his eyes open.

Xiang Shu looked around. “You need to find a safe place to hide.”

Chen Xing stopped in his tracks. A carriage was parked in the backyard. He and Xiang Shu looked at each other. They both recognized it—it was Tuoba Yan’s carriage. They had accidentally escaped into Tuoba Yan’s residence! No wonder there hadn’t been any signs of activity all morning. No matter how thorough the imperial guards were in their search, they wouldn’t search the residence of their own general.

Just then, a voice came from outside. It seemed that Tuoba Yan had returned.

“I’ll go see him,” said Chen Xing.

“Don’t go courting death,” Xiang Shu hissed. “We leave now!”

But Chen Xing just waved his hand and trotted down the corridor.

Tuoba Yan had suffered a heavy blow the previous night. He’d endured through the night, but he was now on the brink of collapse. Fortunately, despite his fury, Fu Jian wasn’t devoid of sense; he hadn’t dragged Tuoba Yan to prison for punishment. Instead, he ordered the entire army to arrest Xiang Shu and Chen Xing by any means necessary. Otherwise, Tuoba Yan would have been the first to be arrested and executed for Princess Qinghe’s death.

Setting aside the heavy responsibility he bore, Qinghe had treated Tuoba Yan like a younger brother. Of everyone in Chang’an City, Tuoba Yan’s sorrow was second only to Fu Jian’s.

Tuoba Yan breathed hard, covering his eyes and forehead with one hand. He sat alone in the hall, gasping. Fu Jian had declared martial law in the city, and the imperial guards were conducting a large-scale search. The Murong family had excoriated the imperial guards and vowed to punish Tuoba Yan for his dereliction of duty. Seeing his anxiety and anger, Tuoba Yan’s subordinates worried that their young general, who wasn’t even yet twenty years old, might do something impulsive and irreparable. They’d escorted him home for a short rest, assuring him that they would report back as soon as they had any news.

Suddenly, Chen Xing’s voice echoed through the hall.

“Tuoba Yan, there’s something I want to say to you!”

Tuoba Yan looked up, staring at Chen Xing in disbelief. What was Chen Xing doing here, and how did he get inside the hall without anyone noticing?!

Tuoba Yan jumped to his feet, but Chen Xing called out to stop him. “Tuoba Yan!”

Tuoba Yan watched him, still hyperventilating. “You…you…”

Chen Xing raised one hand. “If you’re willing to listen, then listen. If not, tie me up right now and take me to see Fu Jian.” As he spoke, he spread his sleeves out to show that he was unarmed. A glance around made it clear that he had come alone.

Tuoba Yan didn’t call for anyone, so Chen Xing knew there was still hope.

“What on earth is going on?” Tuoba Yan cried out in anguish. His eyes were bloodshot. “Why would the Great Chanyu kill her?! It doesn’t make any sense! Explain it to me!”

Chen Xing took a deep breath, and began to narrate the entire sequence of events. The more Tuoba Yan heard, the more absurd it sounded, but he didn’t interrupt. His brow furrowed tightly.

“That…” Tuoba Yan said finally. “That’s impossible! Why would she…?”

“She must have been misled and manipulated. Tuoba Yan, think carefully: Did she ever behave in an unusual manner?”

Tuoba Yan got to his feet and paced back and forth in the hall. Eventually, he looked at Chen Xing again.

“Where’s the mirror?” Chen Xing asked. “With the mirror, I can prove it to you.”

Tuoba Yan regained his composure. “I don’t know. Everything was too chaotic in the moment. You… How is that possible? She was practicing demonic arts?”

“There’s another way. Find Feng Qianyi and let me confront him.”

“Everyone in the Feng family packed up and left in the middle of the night.”

This surprised Chen Xing. He approached Tuoba Yan, who sat down despondently again.

“The Murong family is already causing a ruckus,” Tuoba Yan murmured. “They’re demanding that His Majesty hand over the murderer. Where did the Great Chanyu go? He… Even if she was practicing demonic arts, why did he have to kill her?”

Chen Xing sat by Tuoba Yan’s side. He recalled Princess Qinghe acting as a personal matchmaker for Tuoba Yan; they must have been as close as real siblings. And Xiang Shu was the perpetrator everyone saw the previous night, so until he heard Chen Xing’s explanation, Tuoba Yan hadn’t regarded Chen Xing as an accomplice. Of course this news was upsetting to him.

After a moment’s consideration, Chen Xing extended a hand and emitted a warm, white light from his palm. He passed his hand under Tuoba Yan’s arm and pressed it gently against his chest. Tuoba Yan exhaled, seeming to feel much better.

“Xiang Shu went in search of a way to negotiate with Fu Jian,” Chen Xing told him.

It was useless, at this point, to try to persuade anyone else of the truth of what had happened. Fu Jian alone held the power to decide everything. The only way to resolve this misunderstanding was to explain the situation clearly and hope to avoid his wrath.

Tuoba Yan got up. “I’ll issue an order to hunt down the Feng clan,” he said.

Chen Xing didn’t hold out much hope. If he asked Tuoba Yan to protect him, Tuoba Yan would be charged with shielding and harboring a fugitive, a crime equivalent to participating in the conspiracy himself. However, the most important reason he decided to reveal himself to Tuoba Yan was that Chen Xing agreed with Xiang Shu: They had to ensure that the Yin Yang Mirror didn’t fall back into the hands of Feng Qianyi or his accomplices.

He was even willing to go see Fu Jian himself if it meant Tuoba Yan would agree to protect the Yin Yang Mirror.

Tuoba Yan shot Chen Xing an uneasy glance. “You can’t enter the palace now. If you’re imprisoned, the Murong clan will think up all sorts of ways to kill you to avenge Biaojie. Or they’ll take you hostage and force the Great Chanyu to show himself.” He frowned for a moment as if he were weighing a very difficult decision. “Stay here. My home is the safest place for you right now.”

“No!” Chen Xing said, shocked. “You’ll be harboring a criminal.”

But Tuoba Yan just waved his hand and left. He summoned his men and issued orders, but did not allow anyone to enter the hall. Chen Xing stood to one side of the screen and, listening closely, learned that Tuoba Yan had first sent someone to the palace to retrieve the mirror, then dispatched a team to leave Chang’an and search for Feng Qianyi and his family.

When Tuoba Yan returned, he motioned for Chen Xing to take a breather at the edge of the couch. “The Feng family can’t have run very far yet. You must be tired, right? Sleep for a while. I’ll get someone to bring over some food.”

Chen Xing was inexplicably moved by this gesture. He was about to say something, but Tuoba Yan got there first: “Do you think I’m protecting you because I like you?”

Chen Xing’s face flushed red, and he felt very awkward. This forthright barbarian spoke too bluntly! He waved his hand to get Tuoba Yan to stop talking.

Unexpectedly, Tuoba Yan did not. “No, Tianchi-xiongdi. The most pressing matter at hand is no longer the cause of Biaojie’s death. If the hundreds of thousands of ‘drought fiends’ you spoke of are released, the consequences will be disastrous. You’re the only one who can deal with this latent danger, so I cannot send you to the palace.”

Chen Xing breathed a sigh of relief. Tuoba Yan had hit the nail on the head, and concisely at that. Although Tuoba Yan had been only eighteen

years of age when he earned his post as commander of the imperial guard, it was clear Fu Jian had judged him well.

When Xiang Shu, who was hiding behind the screen, heard this, he knew that Tuoba Yan believed what Chen Xing had told him. Quietly, he jumped through the window at the back of the hall and left.

“Thank you,” Chen Xing said sincerely. He felt like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. “Thank you, Tuoba-xiong.”

Tuoba Yan drew out a map and spread it out on a table. Glimpsing it from the corner of his eye, Chen Xing saw that it showed the layout of the city’s defenses. Tuoba Yan sighed again. “The Murong family won’t let Biaojie’s death go easily. It’s very dangerous right now. The best we can do is pray that the Great Chanyu will untangle this knot as soon as possible.”

Privately, Chen Xing was startled. He did not dare look at the map too closely. What happened last night must have intensified the conflict between the Xianbei people and Fu Jian; as people of the subjugated Yan state, the Murong clan might have even supported Qinghe in her secret plans for a revolt. If so, and if the Murong family were the ones harnessing resentment to create the drought fiends and the mirror world, then their troubles had only just begun. Fu Jian was about to be confronted with the Murong clan’s rebellion. Tuoba Yan was in a precarious situation, too.

Chen Xing racked his brain, but he couldn’t find a way to comfort him.

“If we can find the mirror,” he said in the end, “I guarantee there won’t be any problems afterward.”

Tuoba Yan nodded solemnly and began to rearrange the troops in Chang’an City.

Two hours later, Tuoba Yan had fallen asleep on the table, but Chen Xing, still full of energy, was thinking. He walked over to take a look at the map. On one side of the table, the words of “Marching On and On,” which he had personally transcribed for Tuoba Yan not so long ago, were spread out.

Just then, a noise came from outside the hall. Chen Xing hastily woke Tuoba Yan and ducked behind the screen.

Tuoba Yan sobered up a little. “What is it?” he called.

“We’ve searched the entirety of Changfeng Hall,” his subordinate answered, “but we didn’t find the round mirror you wanted. We asked His Majesty, but His Majesty said he doesn’t remember it.”

Chen Xing’s heart jolted.

When Tuoba Yan didn’t respond, the subordinate continued, “We’ve already informed the palace attendants to deliver it here as soon as they find it.”

“What else did His Majesty say?” Tuoba Yan asked.

“His Majesty was in the midst of a discussion with Wang Ziye-daren.”

Tuoba Yan could only wave his hand to signal for them to leave. The more Chen Xing thought about it, the fishier this seemed. Only five people had been at the scene last night: Xiang Shu, Feng Qianjun, Fu Jian, Tuoba Yan, and Chen Xing himself. He and Xiang Shu had fled during the ensuing chaos. Who could have taken it?

“It’s dangerous now,” Chen Xing said. “Tuoba Yan, it would be better for you to bring all the troops back to guard the city.”

Before Tuoba Yan could say another word, he received another report from his men outside the hall. “Reporting! General! No traces of the Feng family have been found, and their whereabouts remain unknown. We’ve dispatched people to pursue them along Sixteenth Road.”

Tuoba Yan frowned. “That’s strange. Feng Qianyi’s disabled, and he has a family to drag along with him too. They shouldn’t have been able to get far.”

“Then only one possibility remains,” Chen Xing said. “They’re hiding in the mirror. Which raises the question: Who’s in possession of the Yin Yang Mirror now?”

The imperial guards were under the command of the royal family, so they knew the palace grounds like the backs of their hands. Finding a mirror should have posed no problem; they could have found a needle in a haystack. But the Yin Yang Mirror was nowhere to be found. Someone had to be controlling things from behind the scenes.

A third wave of guards arrived, and someone shouted, “Reporting! His Majesty has issued an order: Three quarters after the you hour[32] begins, at the execution grounds located at the West Street entrance, the assassin who was in the palace last night will be beheaded—Feng Qianjun.”

Chen Xing froze in shock.

Chapter 23

CHEN XING UNDERSTOOD why Fu Jian would decide to behead Feng Qianjun so quickly. He had to find a way to appease the Murong family for the time being, and beheading Feng Qianjun would also serve to intimidate the Feng family. But more importantly…

"I have to save him," Chen Xing said. "He didn't have any part in it. Feng-dage is innocent!"

"That's what they want!" Tuoba Yan said anxiously, "Wang Ziye must have come up with this idea. He wants to lure you and the Great Chanyu out!"

Chen Xing understood that it was a trap, but he had to go! He couldn't just stand by and watch them behead Feng Qianjun!

"What would you do?" Tuoba Yan asked. "Tell me! What can you do? Barge in and break him out of prison?"

Chen Xing looked at Tuoba Yan. Of course, he wouldn't ask Tuoba Yan to rescue Feng Qianjun for him; that would be asking far too much. "I can't wait for Xiang Shu anymore. Tuoba-xiong, I need to go to the execution grounds."

Chen Xing had always been the type to take things as they came. After he experienced the fall of Xiangyang, he had absolute faith in his luck. He knew he could get Feng Qianjun away safely, even if he were to rush in shouting, "Halt the execution!"

Eventually, Tuoba Yan realized that nothing he said would convince Chen Xing. "Okay!" he said. "I'll think of something! I'll go see His Majesty now!"

"This doesn't need to be your problem," Chen Xing said. "You just need to get me to the execution grounds."

So Tuoba Yan ordered his men to ready a horse and snuck Chen Xing into a carriage. Night was falling, and as Chen Xing boarded the carriage, he was struck by the sense that something was wrong. A strange

atmosphere pervaded Chang'an City this evening, and a strong gale stirred up out of nowhere.

"What's wrong?" Tuoba Yan asked patiently. Chen Xing shook his head and got on the carriage.

On the way to the execution grounds, Tuoba Yan exhorted him time and time again not to come out of the carriage. He had to hide inside and watch from afar through the carriage curtains.

"I'll notify the Execution Supervisor," Tuoba Yan said. "I'll try my best." Then he left on his horse.

The evening drums were beating two quarters into the you hour—*Dong! Dong! Dong!* A crowd began to gather, heading toward West Street under a gray sky with dark, surging clouds. This was to be the Great Qin's first evening execution of a prisoner since before the construction of Chang'an.

Chen Xing drew aside the carriage curtain to look out. A high platform had been set up at the execution grounds. The other side of West Street was occupied mostly by members of the Murong family, dressed in fine clothes to watch the execution. On the other end of the execution grounds, soldiers were alert and battle-ready.

In a brief moment, countless thoughts flashed through Chen Xing's mind. If he wanted to save Feng Qianjun, then his only real option was to use the simplest and roughest method: to rush out shouting "Halt the execution!" and then offer himself up as a prisoner in exchange for Feng Qianjun's life. Then he would be taken away with Feng Qianjun to meet Fu Jian.

Someone knocked on the carriage from the outside, and a piece of paper was slipped through the window. Chen Xing blinked, startled.

Several words were written on the paper: *Don't act recklessly. I'll save him.*

Chen Xing whipped back the curtain and saw the back of a Hu man, who seemed familiar, though Chen Xing couldn't place him. When he looked in the direction the man was headed, Chen Xing saw that he had

mixed in with the crowd. Chen Xing's gaze swept over a group of people who had gathered in the distance to watch the execution, and under the dim illumination of the dark sky, he saw that among them, standing about half a head taller than everyone else and wearing a bamboo hat, was Xiang Shu.

Xiang Shu grasped his bamboo hat and lifted it slightly, exchanging looks with Chen Xing. Suddenly, Chen Xing felt more at ease; if Xiang Shu was there, then he had to have a plan. What had he been up to for the entire afternoon?

Chen Xing scrutinized the group of onlookers doubtfully. Then it came to him: These were the people who came to visit Xiang Shu, the Great Chanyu, on the first day of their stay in Weiyang Palace—the Hu tribes Fu Jian had neglected.

When Feng Qianjun was escorted onto the platform, the crowd grew restless. Angry shouts came from members of the Murong family. Feng Qianjun's hair was a disheveled mess and his face was covered with blood. Both his hands were tied behind his back.

"His Majesty has issued an order!" the Execution Supervisor thundered. "The Feng family's Feng Qianjun entered the palace late at night and committed high treason by attempting to assassinate His Majesty, the Divine Emperor! Thus, he will be executed here immediately."

Chen Xing's heart leaped into his throat. The gales at the execution grounds grew stronger and stronger, whipping up sand until it obscured the sky. Frigid winds howled fiercely through the streets of Chang'an.

Resentment! Chen Xing drew the curtains of the carriage and dismounted. A gloomy darkness pervaded the execution grounds; it was dusk, and now it was too dark to even discern the outline of one's fingers. All around him, people were shielding themselves with their arms against the swirling sand and rocks. Feng Qianjun's head was already spinning, and he raised it to look at the sky.

The bell tower rang madly in the midst of this hurricane. Fu Jian, who had been concealing himself in the dark, walked out and stared at the sky in disbelief.

Atop another building along Chang'an's West Street, Feng Qianyi faced the execution grounds in his wheelchair, holding the Yin Yang Mirror in his hands. A black vapor erupted from it—the resentment in the mirror world was flooding out to submerge the entire city!

Xiang Shu had been well prepared, but this turn of events was unexpected, so at the last minute, he signaled to the men he had recruited not to proceed. Chen Xing raised his head amid the fierce gales and spotted the masked Feng Qianyi in the distance.

"Is it you?" Chen Xing shouted.

Although Feng Qianyi was far away, his cold voice reached Chen Xing's ears clearly. "You managed to break through the array I set up so many years ago and escape from the Yin Yang Mirror unscathed. I underestimated you."

Then, Feng Qianyi held out the Yin Yang Mirror, which he had gotten back somehow without anyone noticing. A monstrous mass of black vapor exploded from the mirror and surged toward Chen Xing!

"Bastard!" Chen Xing roared. "Feng Qianyi! I'm expelling you from the Exorcism Department!"

Chen Xing threw both of his hands up to face the sky at a diagonal. A resplendent light burst from the Heart Lamp, broke through the darkness, and rushed upward to meet this evil current.

The black vapor swept toward Chen Xing like a tsunami, but to avoid the Heart Lamp's light, it couldn't get near him. It swirled around the execution grounds before gathering into the form of shadow warriors. The executioner howled in anguish, and a massive quantity of blood spilled from him in an instant. The crowd screamed in a panic and started to flee into the darkness.

Chen Xing turned back toward Feng Qianyi, who was situated on higher ground. For a moment, he was torn—should he rush over to seize the Yin Yang Mirror back?—but then he heard Xiang Shu shout from somewhere, "Save people first! I'll go capture him!"

His shout snapped Chen Xing back to his senses. Chen Xing sprinted over to the execution grounds. The black vapor was already encircling Feng Qianjun, revealing the figure of a warrior.

What do they want to do? Chen Xing wondered. Before he could get close, the warrior brandished its sword and snatched Feng Qianjun away by force. Chen Xing understood then that Feng Qianyi's goal was the same as theirs: to rescue Feng Qianjun. He wondered whether he should just let Feng Qianyi save his younger brother, but Xiang Shu was already drawing close to Chen Xing. With a flick of his sword and a loud clang, he forced the shadow warrior away.

"Take him away!" Xiang Shu shouted.

Chen Xing cut the rope around Feng Qianjun's body with his dagger. A warrior charged in from behind to kill them, but another figure appeared beside him and—*clang!*—parried its weapon, guarding Chen Xing. It was Tuoba Yan!

The black vapor spewed forth again, and five or six shadow warriors rushed up from different angles. Blood sprayed out from Tuoba Yan's arm as he took a hit for Chen Xing. He swung the halberd in his hands and, in the midst of the clamor, knocked all of their enemies away.

"Go!" shouted Tuoba Yan.

Chen Xing pulled on Feng Qianjun's arm, then half-carried and half-supported him to stagger down from the execution platform. Black vapor had diffused throughout the city, making the evening seem like a deep, dark night, and screams rang out everywhere in the murk.

"Leave this place!" Chen Xing shouted. "Everyone, run! Hurry! Tuoba Yan, take care of him!"

Nobody needed his reminder; the people knew that staying alive was important and had already begun to flee. Outside of the execution grounds, it was chaos. Chen Xing handed Feng Qianjun to Tuoba Yan, emitting a burst of bright light from his palm to try and discern the direction. "Where's Xiang Shu?!" he shouted. "Xiang Shu!"

I have to catch up to Feng Qianyi! He's activating the Yin Yang Mirror!

Chen Xing forcibly spurred the Heart Lamp a few times to try to locate Xiang Shu, but someone grabbed his arm. "Chen Tianchi?" asked a familiar, low voice.

Chen Xing's heart jolted—it was Fu Jian!

Fu Jian didn't allow him any time to speak. He seized Chen Xing's throat in his hand, dragged him to one side, and shouted, "Where is Tuoba Yan?! Gather the imperial guards! Everyone, follow me! Get to higher ground!"

Still half-carrying Feng Qianjun, Chen Xing was unceremoniously taken to a watchtower on West Street. From this higher ground, he could see the black vapor sweeping across Chang'an.

"Capture Feng Qianyi!" Chen Xing cried. The situation was terrible; now that his array had been broken, Feng Qianyi finally decided to activate the Yin Yang Mirror.

Yet Fu Jian clutched Chen Xing harshly and shouted, "Explain everything to me!"

"There's no time to explain!" Chen Xing shouted back. "Let me go! I'm the only one who can stop Feng Qianyi!"

Fu Jian stared at him, but then from afar came a muffled roar, as if millions of yao were howling in unison. It was too late.

"Fu Jian, you're in trouble now," Chen Xing muttered. Fu Jian let go of Chen Xing's lapel and looked out at Chang'an City.

Xiang Shu led the various Hu tribes in a charge toward Feng Qianyi's position on West Street, but the top floor of the building exploded with a loud blast and collapsed under the black vapor of resentment. All of the resentment from the mirror world had been released!

"Fu Jian." Feng Qianyi's voice echoed through the world. "You seized our Great Jin's power, destroyed our Divine Land, slaughtered us

Han people, killed my family, broke my legs…”

Chen Xing’s eyes widened. In the same moment, all of the bronze mirrors in Chang’an flashed and shot out rays of black light.

Feng Qianyi hovered in the air, nothing sustaining him beneath his robe. He held the Yin Yang Mirror in his hands. Runes swirled everywhere, shining with a purplish-black luster. Shouts of terror came from houses throughout Chang’an City until nearly a million cries converged into a mighty flood. The sound made Chen Xing’s spine go numb.

The power of the Yin Yang Mirror was fully unleashed. Every mirror was connected to the mirror world, and from them gushed the living corpses that had been locked up in the mirror’s Chang’an.

Xiang Shu mounted his horse and spurred it harshly several times. The horse rushed to the building’s second floor across the weak tiles, then, with a mighty leap, galloped onto the tower. Next, Xiang Shu jumped onto the bannisters and, using his momentum, jumped up again. He pulled back the string of a gigantic bow about half the size of an adult and drew a full moon arc.

Chen Xing broke free of Fu Jian’s grasp and ran to a high point on the tower. With a shout of “Break!” he put everything he had into activating the light of the Heart Lamp to its maximum power with both hands. Just as Xiang Shu’s arrow left the string of his bow, a dazzling light erupted from it—it took the form of an arrow and shot through the air.

In the dark night, that arrow drew a visible trail of light in its wake, and, with incredible accuracy, it struck the Yin Yang Mirror in Feng Qianyi’s hands. *Clang!* The Yin Yang Mirror was sent flying, whirling through the air. Chen Xing let out a cheer and rushed down the tower while Xiang Shu landed on the ground. Feng Qianyi roared with great indignation and black smoke billowed from beneath his robe to shoot toward the Yin Yang Mirror.

“Intercept that mirror!” shouted Chen Xing, ignoring everything else.

Another arrow soared over, having been released from Tuoba Yan’s bow as he rode along the street. Like a shower of meteors, the second arrow

struck the mirror with another soft clang, and the mirror flew in an arc toward the tower.

It landed fewer than thirty steps from Chen Xing. Suddenly, a third arrow flew in, brushing the mirror obliquely and striking the edge with yet another clang. The mirror started spinning again and flew toward Chen Xing.

On the watchtower, Fu Jian withdrew his longbow and looked down at Chang'an City in alarm and disbelief.

Having obtained the Yin Yang Mirror just as he wished, Chen Xing couldn't spare any attention for avoiding anyone. He stood below the watchtower and held up the magical artifact as he began casting his spell.

A buzzing white light burst out. The runes revolving in the air above Chang'an City flew over in quick succession, sucked back into the mirror.

"I won't let you ruin my plans!" Feng Qianyi howled. He flew at Chen Xing, leaving a trail of billowing black vapor behind him.

Before anyone could react, Xiang Shu turned sideways, slid over to stand in front of Chen Xing, and swung his longbow down. "Release the arrows!" bellowed Fu Jian from above. "Kill the sorcerer!"

The imperial guards released their arrows, which shot into the sky. Still, it was clear Feng Qianyi didn't fear ordinary weapons. All he feared were the arrows of light in Xiang Shu's hands, and he sprung up to avoid them. Chen Xing took this opportunity to reverse the Yin Yang Mirror by collecting the black vapor that had blotted out the sky and successfully sucking it all back into the mirror.

In an instant, the sky over Chang'an City returned to its original state, but pained wails still rang out in all directions.

"Suck the living corpses back!" Xiang Shu yelled.

"I can't!" Chen Xing replied. "It can only reabsorb the resentment! They've all escaped already!"

Fu Jian hurried down, shouting, “Shulü Kong, explain this! What the hell is going on?!”

“I will give you an account,” Xiang Shu said, “but not now. Jiantou, are you sure you want to start your nagging here?”

An imperial guard rushed over. “Reporting! Your Majesty! The city is full of living corpses!”

Tuoba Yan spurred his horse over. “Retreat and defend the imperial palace! Retreat and defend the imperial palace! Protect His Majesty!”

Fu Jian was furious but powerless; all he could do was wave his hand to order the guards to return to the palace. It was xu hour by now.[33] The imperial guards clustered around Fu Jian as they returned to the palace, and Xiang Shu got Chen Xing to mount a horse. Fortunately, Tuoba Yan had prepared beforehand and rearranged the city’s defense in advance. Throughout the city, fifty thousand imperial guards flooded back like a tide to guard the inner city of Chang’an.

They weren’t in the clear yet, however. When they reached the front of the palace, they heard cries of dread ringing out from the inside.

“There’s some in the palace too.” Tuoba Yan felt as if his blood had coagulated. “Hurry! All of you, go! Take the mirror!”

Chen Xing tried to use the mirror to suck in the living corpses, but the Yin Yang Mirror was unstable from being refined with resentment, and it wouldn’t stop shaking. If he tried to force it, the resentment in the mirror world might just burst right out again. “It won’t work!” he shouted. “The mirror’s on the verge of exploding!”

Xiang Shu led the warriors under his command and explained to them what had happened. Chen Xing couldn’t understand their language, but he saw that Fu Jian’s expression was grim. Xiang Shu made a gesture and everyone responded in agreement. They actually didn’t seem at all fearful about rushing into the palace to fight back the pack of drought fiends that had suddenly appeared.

“Wait!” Fu Jian said suddenly. Everyone looked at him. Fu Jian remained silent for a moment, then said, “Tuoba Yan, gather the troops in

the city and send an order out to the four generals. Just find as many as you can. The imperial guards are to assist the people in the city. Try to rescue as many as possible. Follow me to Epang Palace."

"You want to give up on the people of Chang'an?" Xiang Shu asked coldly.

"The city is already a disaster," Fu Jian spat, "and you can't even see five fingers held out in front of you. How am I supposed to mobilize the army?!"

"Jiantou! Have your courage and judgment been devoured by dogs?!"

"Shulü Kong! Are you the emperor or are We?!"

"Don't fight!" Chen Xing said quickly. "Xiang Shu!"

Chen Xing shot him a meaningful look, and Xiang Shu took a deep breath and dropped it. Tuoba Yan issued an order to ready the horses and, temporarily giving up on Weiyang Palace, he followed Fu Jian out of the city.

Anguished screams and howls could be heard throughout Chang'an City. When ordinary people saw the drought fiends, their horror overtook their fear of death, and they shrieked until their voices went hoarse. Chen Xing and Xiang Shu were riding side by side, but then Xiang Shu abruptly turned around and left.

"Where are you going?!" Chen Xing shouted anxiously.

"Take care of Feng Qianjun!" Xiang Shu yelled back, already a ways away.

Chen Xing was about to turn around to chase him, but Fu Jian rushed over from the side and grabbed the reins of his mount. "Go!" he shouted to Xiang Shu before looking back at Chen Xing. "Chen Tianchi! Explain it to me properly! What is going on?!"

"Let me go!"

"Explain first! Otherwise, don't even think about going anywhere!"

Chen Xing didn't dare to jump off his horse, so he was forced to follow Fu Jian out of the city. He gave the emperor a quick overview of the

story as they went, but he kept looking back, worried about Xiang Shu's safety.

"Then how do we deal with those drought fiends?" Fu Jian asked, bringing him back to the present.

"Chop their heads off," Chen Xing said, gasping for breath. "And take care never to get bitten or scratched. Living corpses carry corpse poison with them."

Tuoba Yan had caught up to them and listened in on their conversation. Fu Jian signaled to him, and Tuoba Yan nodded.

"There's also another way," Chen Xing added. "Burn them with fire."

This idea had come from Chen Xing himself, but it was fair to say that no yaoguai, no matter what kind, could do any more harm in the human world once it had been burned to ashes. Moreover, burning could contain the spread of the corpse poison.

"We'll have to find a way to lure them outside Epang Palace, then use flaming oil and saltpeter canisters to set them on fire," Fu Jian said.

Chen Xing found this plan admirable. Sure enough, Fu Jian was competent as the emperor of the North. If they tried to fight a decisive battle in Chang'an City, not only would it be easy to injure civilians by mistake, it would also be essentially impossible to carry out. The area outside of the capital, however, was vast and deserted, and there were a lot of plants in the wilderness that would make it easier to turn the situation in their favor.

"General Guanjun has arrived!" someone shouted. "General Huwei has arrived!"

The military officers of Fu Jian's court reacted quickly, following the emperor out of the city. More and more troops amassed until at least two hundred thousand soldiers were seen on the plain, galloping in a grandiose formation toward Epang Palace, which stood more than thirty miles from the city.

"Yah!" Once they'd left the city, Chen Xing immediately turned his horse back to look for Xiang Shu. "Where is he?"

His heart was aflame with anxiety. As he reentered Chang'an City, his hand glowed with the Heart Lamp's light, instantly dispersing the living corpses in the streets and clearing a path. A lot of living corpses were pursuing the people in the city, pushing them down onto the ground to bite them. The victims struggled to break free from the living corpses' grasp and sorrowful cries abounded, along with the screams of the dying.

Wherever Chen Xing went, living corpses fled in fear. "Leave through the White Tiger Gate!" he shouted. "Go to Epang Palace! His Majesty is there!"

People began to run away like they had gone mad. Afraid that his horse would trample innocent people, Chen Xing abandoned it and traveled on foot. He grabbed someone at random and shouted, "Where's the Great Chanyu? Have you seen the Great Chanyu?"

The civilian looked toward the inner city, dread evident in their eyes. Chen Xing understood in that moment that Xiang Shu had killed his way back in again. He hurried into the street.

By this point, Xiang Shu had gathered thousands of people, both Hu and Han. More and more people were confronting the drought fiends that swarmed the streets. Many city residents had picked up weapons from the ground and joined Xiang Shu's group in a panic without even knowing who he was. Some of the Hu people recognized him, though, and they put their lives on the line for him, charging in to kill the drought fiends.

"Cut off their heads!" Xiang Shu shouted loudly in the Xiongnu language. He was trapped on both sides, but a ray of light from the end of the street penetrated the darkness. The army of living corpses howled in agony as they were herded away.

Xiang Shu turned his head sharply to see Chen Xing standing at the end of the street with his head held high. Traces of anger were apparent on his face, and a warm, white light was coming from his hands.

Xiang Shu said nothing.

"What are you doing now?!" Chen Xing demanded.

Xiang Shu whistled, and the temporary army that he had organized gathered around him. He spurred his horse forward, extended a hand, and pulled Chen Xing up to sit on another horse. “Leave the city!” he shouted.

The four gates of Chang’an were open wide. Everywhere, people were escaping in a flurry in the middle of the night. Xiang Shu led the Hu cavalry and had, at some point, rescued quite a lot of people from within Chang’an City. They made a raucous group, both Hu and Han included, and they all looked anxiously to Xiang Shu.

A black figure wielding a halberd appeared from the direction of the palace. Xiang Shu and Chen Xing recognized the figure: It was the shadow warrior who’d tried to hunt them down in the mirror world!

Xiang Shu thought to draw his bow, but the distance between them was too great and it was difficult to aim at night, so he decided against it. Chen Xing urged his horse over to Xiang Shu, and Xiang Shu took a deep breath and looked at him.

“They’ve already retreated to the public road,” said Chen Xing.

“Follow me to fight our way back,” Xiang Shu said, holding his bow. “I have something I want to ask Feng Qianyi about.”

“No! Xiang Shu! Don’t be impulsive!”

“Your Heart Lamp can expel the drought fiends. Follow me!”

“What about them?!” Chen Xing motioned for Xiang Shu to look at the people he had rescued: men and women, old and young. Xiang Shu’s timing sure was consistent.

Xiang Shu gave up on his idea.

“Go!” Chen Xing said. “Let’s talk about it later.”

Chapter 24

“WHERE’S FENG QIANJUN?” Xiang Shu asked as he turned his horse onto the paved road, leading more than ten thousand people toward Epang Palace outside the city.

“Tuoba Yan sent some of his men to protect him!” Chen Xing told him. “He’s very safe.”

The horizon was just starting to turn a milky white, but despite the break of day, the vast sky was still densely packed with dark clouds. The sun was hidden, and a chilly wind blew. Xiang Shu rode up onto a small hill, studying the thousand-year-old city of Chang’an. A heavy aura of death hung over the city.

“I don’t understand why Feng Qianyi chose a time like this,” Chen Xing said. “He must have been desperate.”

“He wanted to save Feng Qianjun,” Xiang Shu replied. “Is that a very difficult concept to comprehend?”

“If that’s what he wanted to do, why did he throw Feng-dage into the mirror?”

“He’s not saving Feng Qianjun out of brotherly affection. He’s saving him because he wants to use him.”

“What does he want to use him for?” Chen Xing asked, baffled. But then the answer came to him: Once the resentment possessed Feng Qianjun—and, through him, the Saber of Harmony and Life—Feng Qianyi would be able to draw upon a great deal of power. That family heirloom, thoroughly refined with resentment, would become Feng Qianyi’s greatest strength. If he were to call upon its full power, no one could stand against it.

Thankfully, they had managed to save Feng Qianjun. If he had landed in Feng Qianyi’s hands, they would have a lot more to deal with than a mere outbreak of living corpses.

Thirty miles outside the western outskirts of Chang’an stood Epang Palace.

The west bank of the Zao River was packed with the residents of Chang’an, who were fleeing for their lives. More and more people arrived every minute. This sudden riot had startled the Great Qin’s armies into alertness, and they swiftly assembled at Fu Jian’s location. The northern cavalry, which legend said had never lost a single battle, displayed the efficiency and discipline it had honed in battles across the country. Thanks to Fu Jian’s unparalleled, formidable presence, the armies gathered quickly. The imperial guards arrived first, then the troops within the pass, and finally the various tribes’ cavalries. It only took the generals six hours on horseback to reach the main hall of Epang Palace.

“What the hell happened?!” Murong Chui demanded.

“Silence!” ordered Tuoba Yan.

Fu Jian sat above them all in the main hall. “This incident occurred suddenly, and there is no time to explain,” he said. “How many men do we have?”

Each tribe reported its military strength; Fu Jian had an additional three hundred thousand troops that he could call upon.

“Yesterday morning, I sent my men out with a letter to the governor of Pingyang,” said Murong Chui. “They’re on their way here, leading an army a hundred thousand strong, and will arrive tomorrow morning.”

The governor of Pingyang was Murong Chong. The letter was sent out the previous morning, and the hundred thousand men Murong Chui had summoned sent a clear message to Fu Jian: Murong Chong wasn’t doing this for the sake of answering his emperor’s summons. Rather, he was bringing men to Chang’an to avenge the death of his older sister, Princess Qinghe.

Fortunately, Chen Xing’s narration of everything that had happened finally made Fu Jian realize that the Murong family was acting inappropriately. After he saw Murong Chui and the others barely manage to survive the night, however, it didn’t seem to Fu Jian that they were accomplices of the Feng family. After all, if Princess Qinghe had been

colluding with Feng Qianyi, then there was no reason they would kill the Murong family as well.

Fu Jian was filled with doubt, but he had other things to worry about. “Take stock of the flaming oils and siege weapons in the palace. All troops are to take up their positions and make adequate preparations. As soon as We give the order, we will retake Chang’an.”

“What on earth were those things?” asked Wang Ziye. He had been eating dinner when the incident occurred. The imperial guards had shooed him into a carriage, and like many of the other officials in the city, civil and military both, he had been caught with his hair down and his feet bare. The officials all felt confused and afraid; they really cut a sorry figure.

“The Great Chanyu has arrived!” someone reported.

A murmur rippled through the officials. Murong Chui pressed a hand to his sword.

“Our explanation is here.” Fu Jian sighed and sat down. “Let us listen to what he has to say.”

Xiang Shu entered, coated head to toe in dust. He glanced around the crowd, completely ignoring Murong Chui. Chen Xing followed him in.

The silence in the hall made Chen Xing feel that something was wrong. “What’s going on?”

“We were waiting for you two,” Fu Jian said. “Go on. Explain.”

Chen Xing glanced at Xiang Shu, who nodded, indicating that he should speak. Everyone in the main hall readied their weapons. The generals from the Murong family were trembling faintly, as if they were ready to rush forward and stab Xiang Shu to death to avenge Princess Qinghe. But Chen Xing, who had witnessed Xiang Shu’s skills over and over again, knew very well that as long as he didn’t have to face Fu Jian as well, Xiang Shu would barely have to lift a finger to beat them all. He was way too strong!

“Where should I start?” Chen Xing was tired too, so he walked to the steps in front of Fu Jian and sat down, then turned to address everyone in

the hall. “The reason everything happened, and the instigator behind it all, is actually His Majesty. The rest of you are complicit, too.”

The hall exploded with furious shouts as everyone denounced Chen Xing. Once the crowd had finally quieted, Xiang Shu spoke up.

“The pitiful ones are the innocent people who died of unnatural causes, all for the sake of the war you have been waging all this time and for your desire to leave your mark on history.”

“Our achievements are unparalleled!” Fu Jian declared. “No one but Ying Zheng[34] can stand on equal ground with Us. If We had not recaptured the northern territories, today’s losses would have been much greater!”

“But how many people did you kill?” Chen Xing shot back. “You should know! Every time you wage a war, hundreds of thousands die! How much hatred does that release? How much regret did those people leave behind? The world cannot absorb all of that hatred and regret; it just swirls around in the air until it eventually congeals into resentment. That is where the drought fiends come from.”

Chen Xing was now almost certain of what had transpired. He spoke with fervor and confidence, and from the fragments of knowledge he had, he pieced together the entire sequence of events leading up to the living corpses wreaking havoc on Chang’an.

In order to overthrow Fu Jian, the Feng family had held back on their true intentions for all these years. They purchased the original site on Mount Song where the Exorcism Department had once stood and rebuilt it as the Xifeng Bank. And as they were digging up the headquarters of the Exorcism Department and filling in the canyon, they stumbled across the Yin Yang Mirror, left behind by their exorcist predecessors, as well as the method for controlling this artifact.

Thus, in order to fight back against the ever-expanding Qin State, Feng Qianyi let go of all his morals. Once he did so, there was no turning back—instead, he began to find ways to transform those who perished in battle into drought fiends. He then absorbed the resentment that was abundant in the world and used its power to cultivate them. In the mirror world, he refined them and that general of his into shadow warriors. All he

had to do then was wait for the right moment to release this living corpse army from the mirror, and then he would take advantage of the ensuing chaos to overthrow Fu Jian.

“You provided him with his greatest strength,” Chen Xing said. “As well as the most suitable materials for his cause.”

The hall fell silent.

“Yet you still haven’t answered my question,” said Murong Chui, his voice darkened by grief. “Yes, the Feng family was plotting a conspiracy. But why kill my niece? What did any of this have to do with Princess Qinghe?!”

Wang Ziye interrupted him. “How did Feng Qianyi transform them into drought fiends? Does he have an innate understanding of these secret arts?”

“It’s a kind of evil sorcery,” Chen Xing replied. “It wasn’t recorded in the texts I studied. As for the specific process, the only way we can get answers to our questions is by asking him about it.”

“We have very little information to work with,” Tuoba Yan pointed out. “We don’t even know the military strength of our enemy. Given what happened last night, I estimate that they number more than two hundred thousand…”

The questions flew back and forth, and the conversation ended up sidestepping Murong Chui’s question. No one wanted to mention that Princess Qinghe had participated in the conspiracy, and right under Fu Jian’s nose at that. They wanted to gloss over that as quickly as possible.

Fu Jian’s brow furrowed slightly, and he began observing the expressions on the Murong family’s faces. Some of them had already reached the same conclusion, and they looked alarmed—evidently, they really had been unaware of what Princess Qinghe was up to.

“My preliminary estimate suggests that there are at least three hundred thousand living corpses,” Xiang Shu told Tuoba Yan.

“How did one mirror manage to hold so many drought fiends?” Wang Ziye asked in disbelief. “Where on earth did he find it?”

“It did hold all of them,” Chen Xing replied. “This mirror is the Yin Yang Mirror. It may have been found on one of the battlefields in the Central Plains. There may not be a lot of living people remaining in this world, but dead ones are still easy to find.”

Then Chen Xing activated the Yin Yang Mirror. A black energy shrouded the artifact in his hands. As it slowly spun around in mid-air, everyone grew alarmed and backed away.

“Don’t worry,” Chen Xing said, “I’ve taken back the artifact, and all the drought fiends have already been released. Now, all we can do is wait for the right time to come and find a suitable place to slowly release the resentment in the mirror. After that, it can be purified. We’ll have to try our best not to touch it for now.”

“Since you, xiaoxiongdi, are an exorcist,” Wang Ziye said, “you must be able to purify this magical artifact.”

Don’t tell me you people want this artifact as well? Chen Xing thought. But before he could reply, Xiang Shu said darkly, “Even if he were to purify it, none of you will get your hands on the artifact.”

“Let’s set aside the issue of the magical artifact for now,” Wang Ziye said. “Let me ask again: if you are an exorcist, you must have some miraculous way of dealing with that evil Feng Qianyi, right?”

“No,” Chen Xing replied. “To be honest, since the Silence of All Magic, no exorcist in this world has been able to perform an exorcism. At present, I’m the sole exception to that rule, but my only strength is that I’m able to expel a little resentment in a limited manner, which is only good for self-defense.

“As for Feng Qianyi, what he’s using is the abundant ambient resentment in the world. With how long this situation has dragged on, the effects are even more visible. If His Majesty isn’t willing to stop the fighting and killing immediately, then today’s tragedy *will* repeat itself. That’s all I have to say.”

Fu Jian looked grim. This was the first time since Wang Meng’s death that anyone had dared to denounce him so openly, and Chen Xing just so happened to hit Fu Jian’s sore spot as well. If the situation they found

themselves in hadn’t been such an unusual one, just those few sentences would have made Fu Jian so enraged he would have ordered for Chen Xing to be flogged fifty times on the spot.

Once again, Tuoba Yan managed to soothe any hurt emotions. “Now that we’re clear on the ins and outs of the situation,” he said to Fu Jian, “this servant would like to request to be given the order to fight our way back into Chang’an alongside the Great Chanyu and Chen Xing, so that we may apprehend Feng Qianyi!”

Fu Jian snapped out of it. He pondered for a moment, then looked straight at Xiang Shu. Xiang Shu raised an eyebrow at Fu Jian. “Flushing him out of his lair will be no joke.”

Fu Jian had no choice. “You have temporary command of the imperial guard, Great Chanyu. We’ll settle our grudges after this rebellion is quashed. If anyone dares to seek revenge against you in the meantime, the offenders will be beheaded.”

This should have produced another uproar in the hall, but the Murong family seemed to have realized the truth of the matter. They kept silent and simply glared daggers at Xiang Shu.

“You can keep the imperial guard,” Xiang Shu said. “The two of us are enough to capture Feng Qianyi. Bringing the soldiers with us would be sending them to their deaths.”

“How dare you suggest We are a coward who’s only interested in saving Our own neck?!” Fu Jian protested. “We can still fight! Wang Ziye! Round up the three armies! Open up the armory!”

Xiang Shu and Chen Xing left the main hall. Chen Xing was preoccupied with his thoughts, but as he passed by Murong Chui, he heard him say something.

“You have spent so much energy running around to stop the massacres of the world,” Murong Chui murmured. “You’ve been worrying yourself to death. It’s been a long time since our hasty first meeting in Xiangyang, hasn’t it?”

He took off his mask to reveal a set of burn scars. Shocked, Chen Xing suddenly remembered what had happened as he was escaping Xiangyang with Xiang Shu: When his cart of flaming oil had crashed into the governor's manor, he had run right into Murong Chui!

Xiang Shu, however, stepped almost imperceptibly to the side until he was in front of Chen Xing. "We don't have the time to spare for you right now, Murong Chui," he said, in a voice like ice. "Behave yourself."

Chen Xing's thoughts were troubled as he left the hall. He knew that this matter would not be easily resolved to the satisfaction of all involved. Even if they could clear themselves of the accusations surrounding their role in Princess Qinghe's death, Murong Chui would not be keen to let them off the hook.

Xiang Shu slapped Chen Xing on the back, jolting him so hard that he almost coughed up blood. "What was that for?!"

"You're afraid of Murong Chui?" Xiang Shu asked mockingly.

With some effort, Chen Xing restrained himself from responding to that taunt. Instead, he turned to Tuoba Yan. "How is Feng-dage doing?"

Tuoba Yan motioned for Chen Xing to follow him. Feng Qianjun was safe and sound, confined to one of Epang Palace's side chambers halfway up the mountainside. When Chen Xing entered, he and Feng Qianjun let out simultaneous cries of surprise.

"You're all right!" Chen Xing said.

Feng Qianjun was exhausted. "There's nothing I can do now to fix this," he said after he heard everything that had happened, "but I feel that I have to be the one to stop my ge."

Chen Xing sighed and looked at Xiang Shu, silently asking for his opinion. Xiang Shu obliged: "Although we've sorted out the general sequence of events, there are still a lot of uncertainties. Feng Qianyi… Where did he find the technique to create drought fiends?"

Xiang Shu, Tuoba Yan, Feng Qianjun, and Chen Xing sat down in the room. In a situation like this, the more urgent things were, the calmer they

needed to be. They had to come up with a way to deal with Feng Qianyi. If they were to recklessly return to Chang'an without a plan, they would just be riding to their graves.

Chen Xing, naturally, had nothing to fear. He had the protection of Sui Xing, which got him through even the direst circumstances practically unscathed. But this was by no means the case for Xiang Shu.

Chen Xing thought it over. "Technically speaking," he said, "the Exorcism Department shouldn't have had any methods for controlling resentment or any evil spells or rituals for reviving the dead. That's why I'm sure Feng Qianyi didn't dig it up from underground."

"That is to say," said Feng Qianjun, "Dage learned it elsewhere."

"Perhaps someone taught him such dark arts," Xiang Shu suggested.

"Or he could have coincidentally obtained some kind of secret scroll," added Chen Xing.

Xiang Shu turned to Feng Qianjun. "Did that bastard have any strange friends?"

Feng Qianjun shook his head. He had been frequently separated from his elder brother since he was a child. They only met once every two or three years, when Feng Qianjun went back to the capital for a visit. He knew almost nothing about how his elder brother usually spent his time.

"Remember the sorcerer we bumped into on Longzhong Mountain?" Xiang Shu asked.

Chen Xing did remember him. When they saw him at dusk the previous day, Feng Qianyi had been wearing a mask similar to the one the mysterious man had worn on Longzhong Mountain.

"Which means that there is a mastermind who has been pulling the strings behind the scenes," Tuoba Yan concluded.

Xiang Shu nodded slightly. "And that person is probably in the palace."

"Could it be one of Princess Qinghe's handmaidens?" Chen Xing asked. "Although I'm also curious how that mirror managed to get from the

palace to Feng Qianyi, it's not the most pressing concern we have."

But Xiang Shu thought otherwise. "No, it's very important."

Tuoba Yan frowned slightly, so Chen Xing gave him a brief explanation of what had happened on Longzhong Mountain. The four of them then racked their brains for conclusions as they put together a story that, while incomplete, could mostly explain why things had happened the way they did.

"Someone mastered the art of taking corpses and turning them into drought fiends," Feng Qianjun muttered. "Then they imparted that knowledge to my brother and convinced Princess Qinghe as well. At least for now, we can assume that the princess, my brother, and that mysterious man on Longzhong Mountain are all lackeys in some kind of sorcerous organization."

Chen Xing felt as if he had been woken from a dream. If Feng Qianjun was right, then everything made a little more sense! Feng Qianyi's legs were injured, after all, and he stayed in the capital most of the time, so going around to gather enough resentment to refine the Yin Yang Mirror and transport hundreds of thousands of living corpses into the mirror world was obviously not something he could do easily.

But he sensed that Xiang Shu was leaving a lot of things unsaid. "Xiang Shu?" Chen Xing nudged his arm, and Xiang Shu looked warily at him.

"If you have something to say, just say it," Feng Qianjun said, smiling bitterly. "Look at what my dage has turned into. It's best to say what needs to be said."

Xiang Shu was silent for a long while. He hesitated for so long that Chen Xing was about to tell him to forget it when Xiang Shu finally began to speak.

"Five years ago, when I was fifteen," Xiang Shu said, "a doctor named Kjera came to the Chi Le Covenant."

Chen Xing snapped his mouth shut. He had a hunch that the truth of the greatest mystery that had surrounded Xiang Shu since Chen Xing met

him was about to come to light.

Chapter 25

“THAT YEAR, MY FATHER was suffering terribly from various illnesses,” Xiang Shu said lightly. “If he had continued to recuperate, he could have lived for another three to five years.”

“I’ve heard that in his old age, Lord Shulü Wen was often troubled by wounds he sustained in the wars,” Tuoba Yan recalled.

Xiang Shu nodded. “After Kjera treated my father, he left a medicine for him, which was said to be a miraculous remedy that could cure all diseases.”

Chen Xing grasped the point immediately. “What did he look like?!”

“He wore a mask,” Xiang Shu said. “It wrapped around his head, and he had a kind of odor. He was a Han man, yet he used a Hu name, and he could walk normally.”

Chen Xing fell silent again.

“He talked with my father about many things regarding life and death. My father trusted him and drank the medication he handed over. Afterward, Kjera headed south, and at midnight seven days later, my father passed away peacefully.” Chen Xing frowned slightly, but Xiang Shu kept talking. “But at noon the next day, his corpse had started to change. At that time, I didn’t know that a drought fiend was a kind of yao. I personally watched him come back to life as a living corpse.”

A chill ran down Chen Xing’s spine.

“Fortunately, his transformation into a yao was not yet complete when the elders in our tribe gave him a sky burial. Afterward, I could never feel at ease, so I left home and went south to pursue Kjera’s trail. Then, on the south bank of the Liao River, I discovered that the whole village of the Valennu tribe had been turned into living corpses.”

So that was what had happened… At last, Chen Xing understood why Xiang Shu was so interested in the origins of the drought fiends.

“Why don’t we assume that this doctor was the mastermind who was pulling my brother’s strings?” said Feng Qianjun.

Xiang Shu nodded, and Chen Xing thought things over. That meant the earliest drought fiend drank some kind of liquid medicine and then changed after death. However, it was impossible for every one of those hundreds of thousands of living corpses to have drunk this medicine; dispensing the medication alone would have been an exhausting task.

In any case, while Xiang Shu’s revelation couldn’t solve the immediate crisis, it gave them a goal.

“Tianchi,” said Tuoba Yan, “you mentioned before that we need to be careful not to sustain any scratches or bites when we engage them in combat. Why?”

“Corpse poison,” Chen Xing explained. “The drought fiends all have corpse poison in them, so we must be very careful.”

“What would happen if we got scratched?” Feng Qianjun asked.

“You’d die. The longer a living corpse goes without rotting, the more toxic the poison on their body becomes. Thousand-year-old drought fiends can even form a miasma with their poison, which is often referred to as a corpse miasma in ancient tombs.”

“Those who are poisoned will soon become living corpses themselves,” Xiang Shu said abruptly. Chen Xing hadn’t known that. “I witnessed how the corpse poison in two survivors from the Valennu tribe flared up. A few days later, they became drought fiends.”

“It works like that, too?” Chen Xing muttered. This perfectly explained where the hundreds of thousands of living corpses in the mirror world had come from!

“Not only that,” Xiang Shu added, “but the weapons of the shadow warriors are also coated in corpse poison. We must be careful.”

Tuoba Yan’s expression changed. He turned his head and pressed his right hand against his left arm.

At that moment, they heard a noise from outside. Fu Jian opened the door and entered without notice. Tuoba Yan and Chen Xing got up, but

Xiang Shu remained sitting. Feng Qianjun didn’t know what to do; it wouldn’t be right to stand up, but it wasn’t right to stay seated, either.

“Our scouts reported back that a large number of what you people call ‘drought fiends’ have poured out of Chang’an City and are currently passing through the West Gate,” Fu Jian told Xiang Shu. “They are expected to arrive at Epang Palace in half a day.”

Xiang Shu remained silent.

“I came to tell you one thing,” Fu Jian continued. “When you return to Chang’an, no matter when that is, you must find evidence of Princess Qinghe colluding with the Feng clan. When the Murong family seeks vengeance from you, We won’t be able to convince them without evidence in hand. That’s all. We are going to get ready for war now.”

Xiang Shu sighed. In an insouciant manner, he jabbed his sword into the ground to prop himself up.

“Shulü Kong, do you intend to fight me?” Fu Jian asked stonily.

Chen Xing tried to stop him, but Xiang Shu said, “Dead people can’t rebel. Since you aren’t up to the task, I’ll take care of the Murong for you.”

“Murong Chui,” Fu Jian retorted, anger plain on his face, “is currently leading the troops to resist the drought fiends approaching from the east. Great Chanyu, if you behead the generals defending our country before the battle, you’ll become the enemy of the entire world!”

Chen Xing hastily held Xiang Shu’s sword down.

Just then, an imperial guard barged in. “Your Majesty! A disaster is imminent! There are yao in the enclosure behind the palace, on the west bank of the Zao River!”

Startled, they all sprang to their feet and hurried to higher ground. Fu Jian took only one glance before he marched toward a turret in the palace.

In the distance, a commotion had broken out in the area set up for people to rest. Imperial guards stood on the perimeter, guiding people to flee and wielding weapons to fend off the monsters. The corpses had turned!

Chen Xing turned to Tuoba Yan. “Get the people out! Don’t let anyone else get bitten!”

Xiang Shu, however, took one look and said, “Seal off both banks of the Zao River and start constructing fortifications.”

Tuoba Yan went to issue the orders, gesturing for the other three to stay behind. He hurried down the high platform, and when he reached the riverbank, he removed his shoulder plates, revealing strong arms. The wound on his upper left arm from the execution grounds was now visibly purplish-black, reflecting clearly in the river.

Moments later, a fire broke out in the distance, with fire arrows flying and casks of flaming oil exploding. Chen Xing was stunned. “Fu Jian! What are you doing?!”

After some of the people fled the enclosure, Fu Jian ordered it to be set on fire, wanting to burn to death not only those who were injured but still alive but also those who had escaped unharmed. The east wind fanned the flames, which engulfed the enclosure next to Epang Palace. In an instant, scorching flames reached into the sky, and the air resounded with cries of agony. The army stood on all sides, vigilant and ready for combat, blocking all the exits.

Chen Xing didn’t know how to react, but Xiang Shu covered Chen Xing’s eyes with one hand. Feng Qianjun began cursing loudly. “That bastard! Bastard!”

“Let’s go,” Xiang Shu said in a low voice. “Don’t waste time.”

“Hold on, I have an idea, but I’m not sure if it’ll work. General Tuoba!” Chen Xing called out, spotting Tuoba Yan standing by the river. “We’re leaving now! Do you want to join us?”

Tuoba Yan turned around and walked over to them quickly.

In Chang’an City, at Weiyang Palace, Feng Qianyi had already ascended to the large hall. He sat on Fu Jian’s dragon throne, his body enveloped in blazing black flames.

The black-armored general stood sternly in Hanguang Palace, accompanied by a group of shadow warriors. The hall was dead silent. Feng Qianyi stroked the Harmony Saber on his lap, murmuring, “Now you can get your revenge, too…”

The black-armored general removed his helmet and slowly sunk to one knee.

In a low, hoarse voice, Feng Qianyi said, “I’ve been waiting for this day for far too long.” He lifted his gaze to an empty space in the hall. “My lord, grace us with your presence! We respectfully await your arrival!”

But beneath the gloomy skies, nothing happened.

“Mortals are foolish scum.” Feng Qianyi’s lips trembled as if he were stirred by some inner agitation. “Only your strength can last forever—”

Chen Xing and the others reached the west gate of Chang’an. The city was already deserted of living corpses; Feng Qianyi had sent them all to advance on Epang Palace. The long street was empty. By contrast, Hanguang Palace was packed with row upon row of shadow warriors—almost twenty thousand of them.

Xiang Shu considered their situation. “We’ll act separately from here on,” he said and Chen Xing nodded. The four of them had already agreed on their strategy. “If capture isn’t feasible, just kill them. There’s no need to insist on keeping them alive for interrogation.” As he spoke, Xiang Shu cast a sharp glance at Feng Qianjun, showing no hint of tact.

Feng Qianjun understood that Xiang Shu was warning him not to harbor any benevolence. “Don’t worry,” he said, biting back his anger. “As long as I can recover the Harmony Saber, I won’t let him get away.”

“I’ll do my best,” Chen Xing said. “I’m just worried he might strike immediately without giving me a chance to speak.”

“If you show up with Feng Qianjun, he won’t act right away. Besides, hasn’t luck always been on your side?”

Chen Xing smiled at Xiang Shu. “Great Chanyu, you’re so smart.”

“Begin,” said Xiang Shu.

Chen Xing held up the Yin Yang Mirror. With a burst of black vapor and a loud blast, the mirror sucked Xiang Shu, Tuoba Yan, and Feng Qianjun inside.

Inside the mirror, in front of Weiyang Palace, shattered tiles were scattered everywhere, as if an earthquake had struck Hanguang Palace—evidence of a recent battle.

“I did this?” Feng Qianjun said in disbelief.

Xiang Shu didn’t bother explaining it to him. Still dazed, Tuoba Yan sighed and asked, “Is this the mirror world?”

Xiang Shu pointed to the bronze mirror on one side of Hanguang Palace and instructed the two of them to lie in wait.

Present-world Chang’an, inside Weiyang Palace.

Feng Qianyi seemed to be waiting for something.

Chen Xing couldn’t shake his uncertainty. The black-armored general had not led the army in the assault on Epang Palace, so he was likely guarding Feng Qianyi. The vanguard troops who had been sent out were probably just low-level living corpses.

An eerie wind blew by, filling Chen Xing with a strong sense of insecurity. This was the first time he had really been apart from Xiang Shu since their journey together began. With the mirror separating them, it felt as if the Heart Lamp had lost its powers as a magical artifact.

Chen Xing took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and then opened them again. He began to walk toward Hanguang Palace.

Hundreds of shadow warriors stood guard outside the palace. As he approached, they all drew their swords in unison.

“Is there really any need to be so cautious?” Chen Xing called out. “Feng Qianyi, I have a few questions for you.”

He extended his hand, and the brilliant light of the Heart Lamp erupted from his palm, instantly illuminating the area outside Hanguang Palace. Unlike low-level living corpses, the shadow warriors did not scatter in fear, but they still looked slightly apprehensive and took a step back.

“I’ve given you a chance,” Feng Qianyi said harshly. “Chen Xing, you are foolishness incarnate. Even now, you cling to the naive delusion that you can challenge me with that Heart Lamp of yours, which has no mana at all.”

Chen Xing ascended the steps and entered the palace. Shadow warriors surrounded him on all sides, swords drawn, ready to hack him into pieces the moment Feng Qianyi gave the command.

“I’m giving you a chance now as well,” Chen Xing said. “Turn back, Feng Qianyi. Let go of your obsession. You can still pull back before it’s too late.”

Feng Qianyi burst into raucous laughter. “Do you even understand what it means to pull back before it’s too late?” He looked down at Chen Xing, enunciating each word carefully. “Princess Qinghe may have been Xianbei, but she became destitute and homeless at just fourteen years of age. Her entire family was forced to move to Chang’an, and she and her younger brother, who was not yet thirteen, became Fu Jian’s playthings. They were imprisoned deep within the palace, deprived of daylight, and subjected to the utmost humiliation. A single incorrect word or action could have brought about their entire clan’s annihilation. That’s what you call an ‘obsession?’

“When your wife is killed by the Qin State’s army in war, when two of your children are stabbed to death, and when both your legs are crushed by carriage wheels, leaving you confined to a wheelchair for the rest of your life, you had better remember what you said today. Then you can display that generosity at the expense of others and pull yourself back before it’s too late! Then you can turn around and repent!”

“You’ve forgotten that you’re not the only one who has lost a home and a family,” Chen Xing said lightly. This stunned Feng Qianyi into momentary silence, and Chen Xing smiled. “You’re also the one who

revealed the truth of my family's deaths to me. Otherwise, I would have gone the rest of my life never knowing who it was who hanged my parents."

Feng Qianyi had actually forgotten about that. "You unworthy descendant of the Chen family!" he roared. "You've never considered avenging your country and family. Disloyal, unfilial—how dare you come here to denounce me?!"

"Wake up, Feng Qianyi!" Chen Xing shouted in a powerful voice. "How does your method of revenge make you different from Fu Jian? How many tragedies have *you* caused?! You inflicted your own suffering on thousands of families in Chang'an City. You're even worse than he is!"

Feng Qianyi laughed like a madman. Slowly, he said, "Do you think this is the end? Birth, old age, illness, and death are the bitterest aspects of life. Death will never be the end. When my lord descends upon the world, all the dead will live again in another form."

Chen Xing's heart jolted—those were the words he had been waiting for! He was finally about to get the answer he needed. He narrowed his eyes. "Who is your lord?"

Feng Qianyi raised a hand and slowly pointed to the black-armored general in front of him, who was guarding the emperor's throne. "Do you still not understand?" he asked in a mocking tone. "Then again, you're the only exorcist left. With your meager strength, how could you possibly stop the coming of my lord?"

As he spoke, the black-armored general slowly removed his helmet, revealing his handsome face.

Heavy silence fell over the hall. Rather than the expected surprised recognition—*It's you?!*—Chen Xing said placidly, "I'm sorry, but I really don't recognize your lord."

"He's not my lord!" Feng Qianyi shouted, indignant. "I only wanted you to see! Don't you know who he is? He's the king of the Central Plains! Nearly a hundred years ago, he was the Jin Dynasty's Prince of Zhao—Sima Lun!"

Chen Xing blinked. Suddenly, he recalled that the prince who was revived on Longzhong Mountain was the Prince of Chu, Sima Wei!

“How many more have you people revived?” Chen Xing asked, his expression darkening.

“I have been waiting for this moment of rebirth since I first obtained the Yin Yang Mirror. After today, you won’t have a chance to witness it again. One by one, in the days to come, the eight princes will be revived.”

A chill ran down Chen Xing’s spine. He took a half-step back.

“After we’ve unified the Divine Land,” Feng Qianyi continued, “even were the Exorcism Department to revive, they would have no way of stopping it—and you, alone? You have no hope. Take him down! Chen Tianchi, I’m doing this for your own good. Once you obtain eternal life, you’ll understand its true benefits…”

As Feng Qianyi spoke, Sima Lun’s corpse advanced toward Chen Xing. Chen Xing knew he would extract no more information from Feng Qianyi. Keeping one hand behind his back, he activated the Yin Yang Mirror. The resentment swirling around it began to stir. All at once, a brilliant light burst from multiple bronze mirrors in the hall, and Xiang Shu, Feng Qianjun, and Tuoba Yan rushed out.

Feng Qianyi had anticipated that Chen Xing’s solo advance was a bluff and had preemptively stationed warriors all around the palace, ensuring no one could escape. However, he’d failed to anticipate Chen Xing using the mirror world as a passage to outmaneuver him!

In an instant, Feng Qianjun was on Feng Qianyi. Xiang Shu brandished his sword and charged at Sima Lun while Chen Xing retreated to hide behind a screen. Tuoba Yan spun in midair, swinging his halberd to force back the shadow warriors that had rushed into the hall. Then he positioned himself to guard Chen Xing.

Chaos erupted. With the limited space available in Hanguang Palace, Xiang Shu seized the advantage and, with a resounding clash, sent Sima Lun flying. In the blink of an eye, the two of them had exchanged multiple blows. Sima Lun, wielding a pitch-black longsword, was steadily driven back under Xiang Shu’s relentless assault.

Feng Qianjun had already reached Feng Qianyi. He grabbed his older brother and threw him violently from the throne. Seeing this, Chen Xing shouted, “Protect me!”

Tuoba Yan was no Xiang Shu, but he was nonetheless a valiant general who could hold his own against a thousand foes. He stood guard in front of Chen Xing, pushing back the wave of shadow warriors that surged in to rescue Feng Qianyi.

Chen Xing set aside his concerns about Feng Qianyi for a moment and focused all his energy on the Heart Lamp. He clasped his hands together and began to perform casting gestures. The white light of the Heart Lamp grew brighter and brighter until it filled Hanguang Palace with such a blinding brilliance that no one could look directly at it.

Dread overcame the shadow warriors as Chen Xing’s light filled the hall. The nine runes on Xiang Shu’s immense sword began to light up, one by one.

Under the blinding light, Feng Qianjun pinned his elder brother down. Feng Qianyi, struggling beneath the throne, gave him a peculiar smile.

“Qianjun, you…” Feng Qianyi spoke with great difficulty.

“Why did you kill Qinghe?!” Feng Qianjun roared.

“She’s…not dead…as long as you listen to me…” Feng Qianyi gasped. “Pick up…your saber. I promise you, if you listen to me, that wish of yours…”

Feng Qianjun stared at him. In the next instant, Feng Qianyi opened his mouth and sprayed a jet of black fog onto his younger brother’s face.

Elsewhere in the glaringly bright hall, Xiang Shu unleashed all the strength that he had refined through a lifetime of training—retracting, striking, and roaring with intensity!

“BREAK!” Chen Xing and Xiang Shu shouted in unison.

The massive sword carved a fan-shaped arc of light as Xiang Shu swung it with enough force to shatter the heavens. Sima Lun raised his own

sword to block, but faced with the overwhelming brilliance of the Heart Lamp, his blade shattered.

Unfortunately, a moment before Xiang Shu's heavy sword struck Sima Lun's black breastplate, Chen Xing felt a vice-like grip around his neck. He couldn't breathe—vines had constricted around his throat and dragged him to a pillar in the hall. An instant later, Xiang Shu's sword collided with its target, but because it had lost the power of Chen Xing's Heart Lamp, the blow merely sent Sima Lun flying. Sima Lun flipped in midair, then lunged back at Xiang Shu, landing a powerful punch that knocked Xiang Shu off his feet as well.

Tuoba Yan, startled, tried to shove Chen Xing to safety, but another vine descended from a beam and bound Tuoba Yan tightly to the pillar.

Xiang Shu was struck in the exact spot where Chen Xing had helped him mend a fractured rib a few days prior. He immediately coughed up blood, his vision going dark. Chen Xing rushed toward him, attempting to drag him to safety, but thorny vines erupted from the ground and ensnared all three of them, binding them tightly.

Feng Qianjun, surrounded by flames and wielding the Harmony Saber, stood guard in front of Feng Qianyi, his eyes bloodshot with fury. Feng Qianyi was calm and composed as he climbed back onto the emperor's throne and seated himself.

"Great Exorcist," he said slowly, "if not for the Silence of All Magic, we might have had a proper fight. Unfortunately, without the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth, if you intend to rely solely on that spark in your hand, you must resign yourself to your unfortunate fate."

Chen Xing and Xiang Shu were bound to a pillar together. Xiang Shu struggled against the vines with all his strength, but neither of them could break free. Most of Chen Xing's body was pressed against Xiang Shu's. Soft cracking sounds came from the pillar as the vines continued to tighten.

Chen Xing remained silent. Xiang Shu resisted still, but he didn't know where his massive sword had ended up. With Chen Xing pressed against him, though, Xiang Shu was able to wrap his arm around Chen Xing to shield him as the vines tightened even further, constricting their bodies.

“What should…we do…” Chen Xing gasped.

“Think of a way to…wake him up…”

Xiang Shu exhaled, then took the deepest breath he could, attempting to break the vines apart that way, but the vines only grew more resilient. Chen Xing felt his body being crushed, and he gasped, “Feng-dage…wake up!”

Feng Qianjun remained motionless, his eyes still bloodshot.

Tuoba Yan was being strangled. With his eyes wide open, he gripped the vines and desperately tried to pull them away.

In that same slow voice, Feng Qianyi said, “I guess it ends here for the three of you.”

“Where’s…your luck?!” Xiang Shu gritted his teeth, barely hanging on. The thorny vines had sprouted barbs, which were piercing through their outer garments and into Xiang Shu’s back and arms. As the vines tightened, blood dripped from his skin. In the next moment, the vines grazed Chen Xing’s shoulder, and dark red blood gushed out.

“You’re actually…at a time like this…” Chen Xing was about to lose his mind. Summoning all his remaining strength, he shouted furiously. “You’re actually hard at a time like this! Tell me how you managed to get hard!”

The sensation of blood combined with their warm bodies seemed to have stirred a primal, bloodthirsty instinct in Xiang Shu, causing his blood to boil and his entire body to react uncontrollably.

“Shut up!” he growled, making his final attempts to break free. Each time he took a breath, though, the old wound in his ribs throbbed agonizingly.

Chapter 26

SIMA LUN CROUCHED DOWN and picked up the broken half of his sword, then walked slowly toward the pillar where Chen Xing and Xiang Shu were tied together.

“Let them suffer a little more,” Feng Qianyi told him. “They’ll get away too easily if they die with just one stab.”

Chen Xing almost couldn’t breathe. Xiang Shu struggled to fight back while shielding Chen Xing in his arms. The vines sliced through his skin, creating fresh wounds that gushed blood, and as that blood hit the vines, it was absorbed.

Chen Xing cried out in pain. Both of them were dripping with blood that smeared all over the vines.

But for some reason, when Xiang Shu and Chen Xing’s blood mixed, the Heart Lamp seemed to sense it…and a power hundreds of times stronger than anything he had managed before burst from Chen Xing’s chest.

Xiang Shu shouted fiercely. Chen Xing was certain he was about to be crushed to death when suddenly, he heard a loud snap next to his ears.

Two pillars broke at once, and Hanguang Palace collapsed with a deafening rumble. Beams, wooden pillars, the tiles in the halls, and the brick walls all collapsed, unable to withstand the force of those vines any longer.

In the next moment, the enormous pillars of Hanguang Palace were lifted from within the ruins. Sima Lun struggled out from beneath a pile of tiles, but Xiang Shu’s entire body was enveloped in the dazzling light of the Heart Lamp. His clothing, which had been black from head to toe, had transformed into a snow-white, gilded martial robe. Gold gleamed from his heavy iron sword; light revolved around it from its handle to its tip, turning it golden.

Xiang Shu opened his eyes. “Get lost in the reincarnation cycle,” he said coldly.

The Protector Martial God had appeared! Chen Xing, crawling out of the heap of broken tiles, was stunned. He’d only ever read about it in a book, so he’d always thought that “Protector Martial God” was merely a name—but it was actually an apt description!

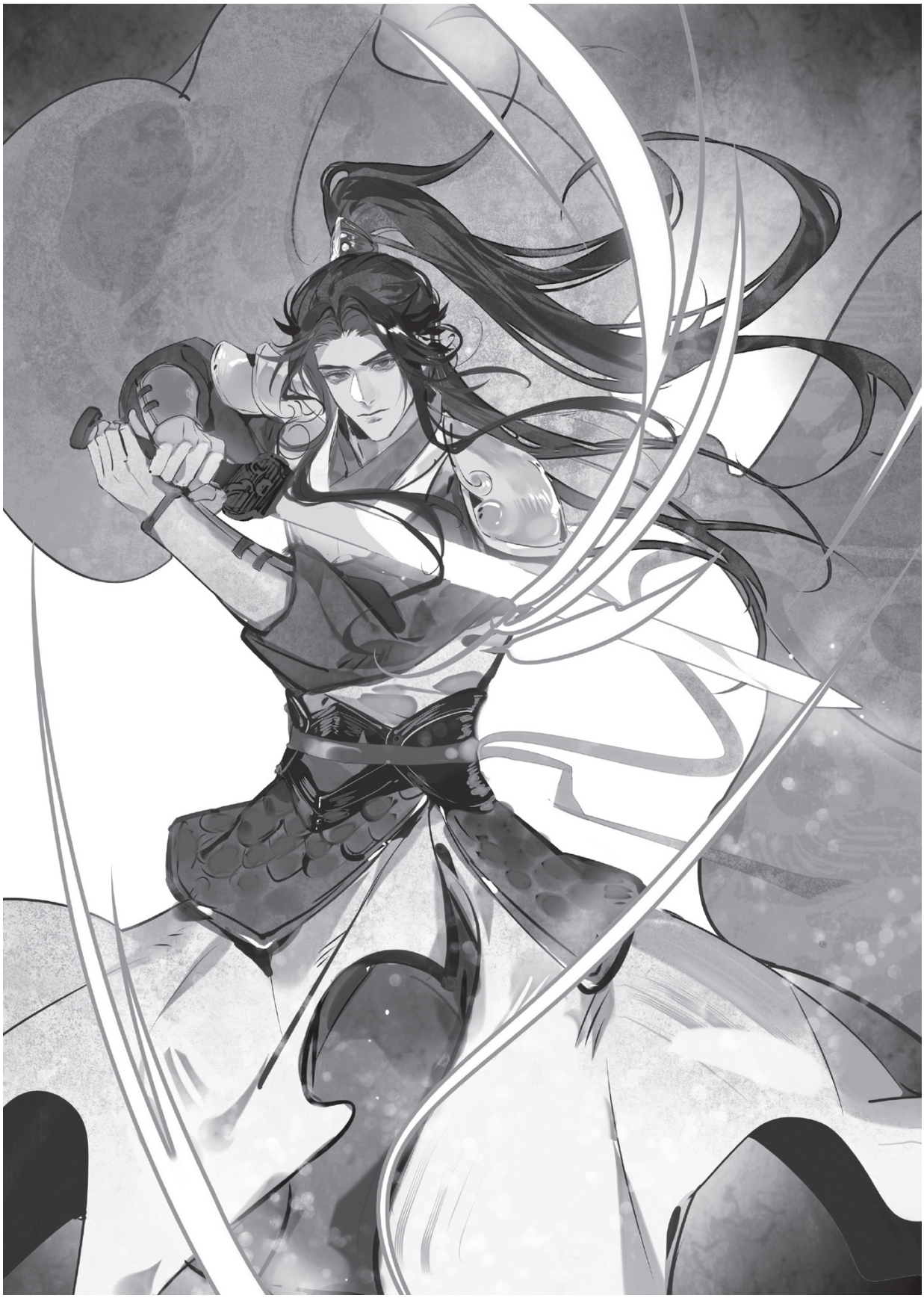
Wielding his sword in both hands, Xiang Shu launched a move that shook the heavens. Sima Lun’s armor shattered in an instant, and he unleashed a mad roar. His entire body burned in the scorching flames that burst from Xiang Shu’s golden sword until there was almost nothing left of him.

“I’m finally free… Thank you…” a low voice uttered as the corpse disintegrated into ashes and scattered into the air.

“You…you…” Chen Xing was beside himself with joy. “What happened?! What just happened?!”

“I don’t know!” Xiang Shu yelled. He had already returned to normal. “Save them first!”

The effects of being a Martial God lasted only for a brief moment. Now, no matter how Chen Xing spurred the Heart Lamp, he could no longer trigger any changes. Shadow warriors swarmed in from all sides. Xiang Shu rushed toward the center of the Hanguang Palace ruins, but millions of thorny vines shot out from within the fallen bricks.



Feng Qianjun's vines pushed against the roof of the palace as blood flowed from the corners of his mouth. The heavy sword in Xiang Shu's hand shone. Again and again, he tried to charge in, but he couldn't breach Feng Qianjun's defense.

Chen Xing dragged Tuoba Yan out from the other side of the collapsed ruins. Fortunately, Tuoba Yan was wearing armor. The injuries he'd suffered weren't too severe, and the thorns hadn't left too many lacerations on his body.

"Wake up!" Chen Xing cried anxiously. He held up the Heart Lamp with one hand and pressed it against Tuoba Yan's forehead.

Tuoba Yan woke abruptly, and the first thing he did was wrap Chen Xing in his arms and roll them over to evade the shadow warriors who were charging them from behind Chen Xing. Tuoba Yan looked at Feng Qianjun and picked up his halberd. "We need to restrain him!"

"Take me over there while Xiang Shu distracts him!" said Chen Xing.

Tuoba Yan took Chen Xing with him, and wielding his halberd in one hand, he charged through the group of warriors, closing in on the center of Hanguang Palace. Meanwhile, all Xiang Shu could see was vines; he was wary of getting entangled by Feng Qianjun again, so he watched for an opportunity to break free. He had just secured a retreat when Tuoba Yan rushed over.

"Go up!" Xiang Shu flipped out of the way of the vines and pushed Chen Xing up. Tuoba Yan drew near and, avoiding the vines, took half a step back and swung his halberd out horizontally to give Chen Xing a boost. Chen Xing leveraged the momentum to get higher, then he emitted an intense light from his palm, lifted his elbow, and slapped his palm against Feng Qianjun's face.

"*Expel!*" Chen Xing's voice rang out like the morning bells and evening drums. The light from the Heart Lamp quickly invaded Feng Qianjun's body, and the resentment within dissipated with a blast. Chen Xing's slap made Feng Qianjun stumble, the clarity in his eyes returning.

The vines disappeared. Tuoba Yan and Xiang Shu spun around to resist the shadow warriors that were rushing in. The tens of thousands of shadow warriors who had been guarding Weiyang Palace gushed toward them like a tsunami. Feng Qianjun was still standing, gasping for breath.

“Where’s your brother?!” Chen Xing shouted. “Capture him! Quick! We’ve already won!”

Another round of mad laughter rang out from the ruins.

“Far, far from it,” came Feng Qianyi’s sinister voice. “The blood array was not completed; I don’t expect anything more today. Exorcist, you will see my lord one day, and when the time comes, the entire Divine Land will submit to him!”

Slowly, Feng Qianyi rose from the ruins. His entire body seemed to have undergone a metamorphosis, and purplish-black blood trickled from his eyes.

Feng Qianjun looked up. “Stop! Gege!” he shouted, his voice full of sorrow.

“We can’t hold them back anymore!” Tuoba Yan yelled. “Someone think of something!”

Feng Qianjun wielded the Harmony Saber at a slanted angle. With a cry of grief, black flames burst from his body once again. In a heartbeat, all of the trees in Weiyang Palace and even the wider city were uprooted; pitch-black and withered, they surged toward Hanguang Palace.

Xiang Shu was shocked. Just as he turned back to look, Chen Xing said, “He has regained his rationality!”

Feng Qianjun seemed to be able to control the Saber of Harmony and Life, even though it had been refined with resentment. The area in front of Weiyang Palace turned into a battlefield for withered tree people and shadow warriors, instantly easing the pressure on the other three.

“You live up to the Feng family name,” Feng Qianyi said lightly, hovering in midair. “A day will come when you will offer this saber to my lord—”

“Stop, please!” Feng Qianjun cried. His eyes were full of indignation, and he let out another mad howl. Black flames surged, and vines appeared from beneath the ground to fly at his older brother.

Xiang Shu seized the opportunity to leap onto the vines and dash across them, while Chen Xing held up his Heart Lamp at once. Xiang Shu jumped through the air, and as he soared, he leaned back and held his sword with both hands. His body curved into a beautiful arc as the massive sword shone with a resplendent light.

“…Before this.” Feng Qianyi closed his eyes; he had given up resisting. He spread both of his arms.

Xiang Shu swung his sword down, and the tendons of Feng Qianyi’s corporeal body were torn apart, his bones fractured. The black vapor that protected him disintegrated in the light of the Heart Lamp, and he plummeted to the ground. At once, all of the shadow warriors in Weiyang Palace lost the resentment’s power and were felled by the tree people.

Feng Qianyi fell like a puppet with a cut string. He let out a muffled sound, his eyes looking up into the sky above.

Xiang Shu landed, Feng Qianjun put his saber away, and Tuoba Yan withdrew his halberd. Chen Xing’s whole body was throbbing with acute pain; he was on the brink of collapse. Feng Qianyi mustered the last of his strength to speak. “It’s still too early… I can only blame myself for my impatience…”

All the resentment in his body dispersed. His eyes remained wide open as he died.

Chen Xing rushed forward to shake Feng Qianyi vigorously. “Aah! Don’t die! Wake up!” He hadn’t asked what he needed to ask yet. Without any evidence, how would they be able to explain themselves when they got back?

Tuoba Yan pulled Chen Xing away; Feng Qianjun was still beside them, after all. They didn’t want Feng Qianjun to lose control and act recklessly after witnessing his older brother’s death. Xiang Shu was always on guard against Feng Qianjun, but before long, Feng Qianjun returned to normal and sheathed his saber.

“Your brother’s dead,” Chen Xing said to Feng Qianjun. He inspected Feng Qianyi’s pupils; they were already dilated.

Feng Qianjun walked out of Hanguang Palace. The first signs of dawn began to creep over the horizon, illuminating the empty city. The enormous Weiyang Palace was strewn with corpses.

When Feng Qianyi died, the shadow warriors’ armor had dissolved into black vapor and vanished, restoring them to their original appearance: white bones and rotted flesh. The tree yao summoned by the Harmony Saber had twisted the living corpses into fragmented pieces, so broken limbs littered the ground. The remaining few living corpses had been snapped in half and were still struggling.

Another night had gone by since everyone first fled Chang’an. When dawn broke on the plain outside Epang Palace, the living corpse army finally made its grand arrival. But as the sun rose, they lost their marching formation for some reason and began to wander aimlessly, searching for food to gnaw on as if they were wild beasts under no one’s control.

The Great Qin Army swarmed out in full force and stopped in front of the Zao River. After igniting their flaming arrows, they released them at random and set the living corpses on fire. The army then separated into two groups, flanking the enemy on either side to trap three hundred thousand living corpses between them, then drove the corpses toward the central area of the riverbank.

At that moment, the last batch of people fleeing from Chang’an City mixed in with the group of living corpses. They had to avoid both the living corpses and the army’s stray arrows, and they pled bitterly for the Qin Army to let them go.

“Reporting!”

Fu Jian, clad in the emperor’s armor from head to toe, was already on high alert. He knew what the scout wanted to say before he even spoke and interjected, “Don’t let anyone go! Chase anyone who has been bitten or scratched back into the encirclement!”

Wang Ziye and the other civil officials watched the battle from the side. On the east bank of the Zao River, anguished wails shook the earth,

and resentment billowed into the sky. A dense, dark mass of three hundred thousand living corpses, their numbers even greater than those of the army, were still trying unconsciously to break through the siege. It was a spine-chilling sight. The moment a soldier was bitten while resisting the living corpses, they were reared into the group of living corpses by their own comrades under Murong Chui's stern command. In the blink of an eye, living corpses swarmed, tearing them into pieces and gnawing on them.

"Your Majesty," said Wang Ziye, "it's about time."

The circle of soldiers was gradually closing in. Every living corpse within a ten-mile radius had been driven into the center of a designated area. Behind Fu Jian, below Epang Palace on the other side of the river, siege catapults retrieved from a warehouse were found to be in working order.

As he raised the emperor's sword, Fu Jian shouted, "Fire!"

In the light of dawn, the catapults on the opposite side of the river launched their attack. Fire canisters obscured the sky, flying toward the middle of the encirclement, where they broke and spilled flaming oil onto the ground. The resulting explosions produced countless crimson clouds and successfully ignited the living corpses.

A gust of eastern wind blew by, and the fire began to spread rapidly. Throughout a one-mile radius, living corpses that had been set on fire began to push outward frantically.

"Hold your guard! Hold!"

All the generals of the Great Qin rode their galloping horses. Soldiers held up their shields and guarded the encirclement fiercely; rows of them surrounded the living corpses to prevent them from breaking through. Raging flames surged, and countless figures were set ablaze, frantically crashing into everything around them. Pained howls rang out, and for a moment, no one could tell if the figures being burned were humans or the so-called "drought fiend" yao. The onlookers' hearts were gripped by an involuntary chill.

The gales grew stronger and stronger. Tongues of flame started to leap out of the circle. Thick smoke billowed and blotted out the sky,

forming dense layers of clouds. The smoke made the soldiers' eyes water.

Fu Jian's intuition, honed through hundreds of battles and his experiences braving fire and water, warned him like a fire alarm. "Dispatch more men leeward!" he ordered decisively. "Immediately!"

But the order came too late. On the west side of the encirclement, the first gap appeared leeward. Flames began to spread from the living corpses to the soldiers on guard.

Fu Jian, clad in golden battle armor, leaped onto a horse and shouted, "Imperial guards, listen to my command! Follow me and set out!"

The people on the other side of the riverbank watched in horror, and a disturbance began to stir. The circle had been breached, and the gap was getting bigger and bigger. Living corpses, enveloped in flames and reeking of burning flesh, charged toward the riverbank. If they crossed the river, all of the remaining residents of Chang'an would die there!

People fled in a panic, triggering an even more serious disturbance. Fu Jian couldn't afford to care about his people; if they lost this battle, he would have to abandon his people and the capital and flee with the army. His prestige as an emperor would vanish, and he would become the laughingstock of the whole world!

But right at that moment, they all realized something. Someone shouted, and everyone raised their heads and looked around.

"Great Chanyu!"

"The Great Chanyu is back!"

In the distance, from the direction of Chang'an City, came a clear whistle.

More than two thousand people gathered in front of a huge wooden bridge on the Zao River. It was as if they had all received an order to ride their horses out at once. Xiang Shu led the vanguard on horseback, and Chen Xing, on his own horse, was by his side. Chen Xing spurred his Heart Lamp, and its light shone brightly. The resentment that shrouded the plains of Zao River dispersed when it met the light, and the living corpses were driven back into the circle of soldiers.

“Sixteen tribes, listen to my order!” Xiang Shu shouted in the Tiele language. “Guard Epang Palace!”

Former subordinates of various tribes, those who had migrated to the south but been neglected by Fu Jian, voiced their agreement in unison. They turned their horses around and followed Xiang Shu. Even among the Xianbei people, many responded and held up their weapons.

Murong Chui was furious. “Keep your positions!”

Feng Qianjun galloped swiftly on his mount. He swung his Harmony Saber out, its black light bursting forth, and countless pitch-black vines sprang from the ground. The vines reinforced the circle and trapped all the living corpses that were aflame.

Xiang Shu rushed over on his horse, his massive sword strapped to his back. Within a mere thousand steps, he had assembled a team. Looking into the distance, Fu Jian saw that Tuoba Yan had returned as well.

“Imperial guards!” Tuoba Yan wielded a halberd in one hand and held the reins with the other. “Stand with me in battle! Guard His Majesty! Protect Chang’an!”

Reinforcements joined the battle. The circle regained its shape, but the burning living corpses tried to flee west. They pounded fiercely against the defensive line and created a gap in the barricade once again! Leading the imperial guards, Tuoba Yan exerted his utmost to resist them; if they could endure it for this short moment, they would win!

“They’ve all been set on fire!” cried Fu Jian. “Retreat!”

“No!” Xiang Shu roared, turning his horse around. “If the drought fiends enter the river, the Zao River will be poisoned! Who will take responsibility then?!”

The catapults released their last wave of flaming oil, and the raging flames spread again under the fierce gales. Innumerable soldiers died as the Qin army faced its enemies, burned to death and scratched by the drought fiends. The Murong family suffered the greatest losses and looked to be on the verge of a crushing defeat. The land was in an upheaval.

Then, another batch of reinforcements arrived.

“Reporting! The Governor of Pingyang, Murong Chong, has arrived!”

Thousands of troops charged over the eastern horizon, backlit by the sun. There were a hundred thousand cavalrymen dressed in battle armor that glistened in the sunlight; the young martial general in the lead wore a cloak as crimson as sunset clouds that fluttered in the wind. He led Pingyang’s armored cavalry and charged into the enemy’s ranks without a word.

“Fenghuang-er!” shouted Fu Jian.

The living corpses that were breaking through the west side were once again pushed back into the circle. Xiang Shu held his heavy sword high and shouted, “Charge with me!”

The Sixteen Hu tribes let out a roar that shook the heavens and followed Xiang Shu, charging into the flaming battlefield to launch their first assault. Burning living corpses were smashed to pieces, leading to wave after wave of large-scale assault formations by the Qin army. The Murong family’s army, the imperial guards under Fu Jian, the guards led by the generals of the Great Qin, and even Murong Chong’s Pingyang army relied on their armored cavalry, rushing the living corpses and trampling them wildly.

The earth shook beneath them. The Qin army was like a tide that crushed the enemy over and over again, as if they were venting their frustrations. It was the first time Chen Xing had seen anything like it. The sun rose, and the clouds dispersed.

The three hundred thousand living corpses were finally vanquished; they were made from dust, and to dust they returned. Throughout the plains of the Zao River, they crumbled into ash, and, as part of the endless cycle of life, returned to the earth to nourish new life on this land.

It was finally quiet. A gust of wind blew over the plains, carrying countless black embers swirling into the sky.

Xiang Shu reassembled his team in an open space beside the riverbank. Chen Xing was so exhausted that he wanted to simply lie down

on the ground, but just as he was about to dismount, Xiang Shu said, “Don’t get off your horse.”

Chen Xing smelled danger then, and sure enough, trouble came. Now that the living corpses were cleared, the Pingyang army and the Murong clan approached their group. A martial general walked out, took off his silver helmet, and threw it onto the ground, revealing his handsome face.

Yet the Sixteen Hu tribes gathered behind Xiang Shu weren’t the slightest bit afraid. Both groups stood facing each other from a distance, separated by a sandbar.

Murong Chong’s black hair fluttered in the wind. His Xianbei complexion, which was visible from his face to his neck, was as white as milk, and his eyes were like amber soaked in water. At first glance, Chen Xing almost thought that he was a beautiful female general.

Both sides fell silent. Xiang Shu sheathed his sword and carried it on his back. His martial robe was in tatters, his body riddled with wounds. The massive army behind Murong Chong was orderly and disciplined, and not even the whinnies of their horses could be heard. They were looking at the other side quietly, just like that.

When Murong Chong spoke, his voice was gentle, yet it possessed a cold and stern quality. “I’ve long heard that the Great Chanyu’s outstanding martial skills are unrivalled throughout the world. You’re known as the ‘enemy of all armies.’ I wonder how you would fare against my hundred thousand cavalrymen?”

For a moment, Chen Xing thought Xiang Shu wouldn’t answer. But without sparing Murong Chong a glance, Xiang Shu twirled the reins of his horse around his hands twice and replied in an indifferent tone. “I haven’t fought an army of more than ten thousand men unarmed since I entered the pass, so I don’t know yet. Are you sure you want to fight today?”

“It’s not a question of whether I want to fight. Instead, I’ll have to ask the Great Chanyu if the Murong family has ever offended the Great Chanyu before. Whether it be an attempt to kill or dismember, please enlighten me.”

Xiang Shu raised an eyebrow and finally glanced at Murong Chong. “Never.”

“Then why did you kill my sister?!” snarled Murong Chong.

The Murong clan began shouting over one another with utmost indignation. Murong Chui stood out from the ranks. “Great Chanyu,” he said, “since the Ancient Chi Le Covenant, the Murong clan has never dared to blaspheme the covenant to which we pledged our allegiance in blood. Now that disaster has been averted, you owe us an explanation.”

Xiang Shu didn’t respond, merely frowning slightly. Chen Xing did want to explain what had happened, but they didn’t have any proof, nor any leads on the identity of the “lord” Feng Qianyi spoke of. At this point, even if they had spared Feng Qianyi’s life and gotten him to talk and confront the Murong clan, they would never admit that Princess Qinghe had participated in the conspiracy; they would just accuse him of framing her. Otherwise, the Murong clan would be deemed guilty by association. And how could Fu Jian ignore a family that was plotting to rebel against him?

Fu Jian finally came forward and entered the field. “Murong Chong! Listen to me.”

Murong Chong’s gaze shifted to Fu Jian and remained on him for a brief moment but quickly returned to Xiang Shu. He studied Chen Xing, who was beside Xiang Shu, his gaze full of doubt.

“Shulü Kong,” Fu Jian said, “where’s the evidence?”

“There’s none,” Xiang Shu replied coldly. “You should know better than anyone who’s right and who’s wrong.”

Fu Jian appeared dumbfounded. He took a deep breath, looking as if he was resisting the urge to go and hack Xiang Shu to death. Wang Ziye rushed over on horseback. “The Governor of Pingyang has journeyed a great distance to get here,” he said. “Why don’t you report back to Epang Palace first, and later—”

“Go!” Xiang Shu shouted decisively. Everyone retreated.

“Great Chanyu, I seek your advice here today.” Murong Chong obviously didn’t want to let Xiang Shu go. With an order, the hundred thousand troops behind him opened up into a charging formation; they

intended to rely on their advantage in military strength to kill Xiang Shu on the spot and avenge Princess Qinghe.

“Who dares to move?!” Fu Jian roared angrily.

Xiang Shu didn’t say another word. He turned his horse around and charged out of the circle. A deputy general nocked an arrow on his bow, but he was struck off his horse by Xiang Shu’s sword. The entire army erupted in an uproar. Murong Chong was furious, and his army closed in tight as they chased after Xiang Shu.

Chen Xing spurred his horse to follow. The ground quaked violently, and the great Pingyang army began to speed up as they launched their surprise attack.

However, at this interval, another group of cavalrymen charged in. They dismounted with their shields and spears raised, facing down the hundred-thousand-strong Pingyang armored cavalry. Tuoba Yan took the lead and charged through the camp on his horse, shouting, “Imperial guards, hear my orders! Kill anyone who dares disobey the imperial decree!”

“Tuoba Yan!” Murong Chong snarled. “You traitor!”

With the clear boundary between the imperial guard and the Pingyang army, Murong Chong wasn’t willing to challenge Fu Jian’s authority again. He threw his weapon to the ground hatefully.

Xiang Shu had already galloped away from the west bank of the Zao River and passed the vast wooden bridge. At the sound of a crisp whistle, people everywhere below Epang Palace got up. They looked in the direction where the former Sixteen Hu subordinates were leaving. Even more young people from Chang’an ran down the hill, leaped onto horses, and chased after Xiang Shu.

Smoke and dust billowed. Just like that, under the eyes of nearly six hundred thousand Chang’an soldiers, Xiang Shu led thousands of warriors and civilians away, leaving a trail of dust in their wake.

“Jiantou!”

“You’re on your own! We’ll meet again someday!”

Fu Jian seemed conflicted as he watched Xiang Shu take his subordinates and gallop onto the main road out of Chang’an.

Hooves struck the ground heavily on the surface of the main road before they entered the wilderness.

At the height of summer, the sun shone brightly, the grass grew tall, and orioles soared through the sky. After they left Chang’an, clear skies could be seen spanning ten thousand miles, the azure empyrean looking like it had just been bathed.

Chen Xing looked back at the large troop behind them that stirred up a billowing trail of dust. The old Sixteen Hu warriors were first, and next was the younger generation of the Hu people who followed Xiang Shu. Close to six thousand people converged in a torrent that gushed out of Guanlong like a magnificent tide as they headed north.

Chen Xing spurred his horse and looked at Xiang Shu, who was riding side by side with him. “What are we doing?”

Xiang Shu didn’t answer at first. He glanced at Chen Xing and deliberately slowed his horse down. “Chang’an doesn’t welcome us,” he said calmly. “Don’t you get that?”

“Then where are we going now?”

“We’re going home!”

“Going home?” Chen Xing was bewildered.

“Chi Le Chuan!” a warrior reminded Chen Xing in the Han language.

Xiang Shu’s clear voice rang out: “Chi Le Chuan, under the Yin Mountains.”

As soon as the song started, it evoked a vigorous overtone of lofty mountains and vast prairies.

“The sky resembles an arched yurt,” sang a group of Hu people behind Xiang Shu and Chen Xing, “covering the plain whole.”

The song struck Chen Xing instantly. The Xianbei dialect was clear and elegant, yet Xiang Shu sang in such an imposing manner that it

sounded like an eagle crying out into the vast skies.

“The vast and blue sky, the boundless wilderness,” the crowd sang in unison. “When the winds blow, the grass bends low, as cattle and sheep will show.”

“Yah!” Xiang Shu spurred his horse and barreled away, and Chen Xing rushed to catch up. The main road was perfectly straight; it led to the lofty, imposing pass in the north and, beneath it, the Great Wall.

A boundless sea of grass greeted the sky and blanketed the earth on their way to the Great Wall. Beyond, the extensive ranges of Saibei’s sacred mountains[35] were like the great lakes of Hulunbuir that glistened like gems, like shimmering rivers that looked like belts of jade.

In that far end of the Divine Land, where the boundless field was like an arched yurt over the outlands, lay a whole expansive world.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

Dinghai Fusheng Records

VOLUME 2

CHARACTER GUIDE & GLOSSARY

Characters

CHEN XING 陈星: The last exorcist, tasked by his shifu with a quest to restore magic to the world before catastrophe strikes. He has uncommonly good luck, but it will run out in four years, when he is twenty years old.

XIANG SHU 项述: Also known as Shulü Kong (述律空), Xiang Shu is the man Chen Xing's heart lamp has designated his Protector Martial God, but he wants nothing to do with it. His position among the Hu people as the Great Chanyu comes as a surprise to Chen Xing.

Great Qin

FENG QIANJUN 冯千钧: A skilled swordsman who accompanies Chen Xing and Xiang Shu.

FENG QIANYI 冯千镒: Feng Qianjun's older brother. Their family owns Xifeng Bank.

FU JIAN 苻坚: The Emperor of Qin and the leader of the Five Hu.

MURONG CHONG 慕容冲: Governor of Pingyang. Fu Jian is enamored of his beauty.

PRINCESS QINGHE 清河公主: Fu Jian's concubine and Murong Chong's sister.

TUOBA YAN 拓跋焱: A cousin of Princess Qinghe and the commander of the imperial guards, although he's only eighteen.

WANG ZIYE 王子夜: Fu Jian's personal secretary.

YUWEN XIN 宇文辛: Chen Xing's childhood friend.

Great Jin

ZHU XU 朱序: Governor of Liangzhou, in charge of defending Xiangyang.

XIE AN 谢安: A Jin minister who gave Chen Xing the document that convinced Zhu Xu to help him.

Beyond the Great Wall

SHULÜ WEN 述律温: Xiang Shu's father.

KJERA 克耶拉: The mysterious man who transformed Shulü Wen into a living corpse.

Other

CHEN ZHE 陈喆: Chen Xing's deceased father.

SIMA WEI 司马玮: One of the eight princes who died during the War of the Eight Princes, now resurrected by a mysterious masked figure.

XIANG SHU 项述: A dog.

Name Guide

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags:

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

DOUBLING: Doubling a syllable of a person's name can be a nickname, e.g., "Mangmang"; it has childish or cutesy connotations.

DA-: A prefix meaning big/older.

XIAO-: A diminutive meaning "little." Always a prefix.

-ER: An affectionate diminutive added to names, literally “son” or “child.” Always a suffix. Can sometimes be a fixed part of a person’s name, rather than just an affectionate suffix.

DI/DIDI: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

GE/GEGE/DAGE: Older brother or an older male friend.

JIE/JIEJIE: Older sister or an older female friend.

SHIFU: Master; teacher.

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother. Usually implies that they studied under the same shifu.

SHIDI: Younger martial brother. Usually implies that they studied under the same shifu.

DAREN: Similar to “milord,” a way of respectfully addressing someone who is either an aristocrat or a government official of medium or higher rank.

XIANDI: A respectful term of address for a younger man the speaker isn’t particularly close to. It is archaic in modern Chinese.

Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

Note on Spelling

Romanized Mandarin Chinese words with identical spelling in pinyin —and even pronunciation—may well have different meanings. These words are more easily differentiated in written Chinese, which uses logographic characters.

General Consonants

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

General Vowels

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **yo**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

Glossary

SUI XING: An archaic name for the planet Jupiter.

YAO: Supernatural beings, ghosts, and spirits—similar to the term "yokai" in Japanese.

MARA: A demon from Buddhist mythology associated with darkness and death. In addition to death and destruction, Mara traditionally represents obstruction to enlightenment.

HU PEOPLE: Hu is a historical term for non-Han people, sometimes translated as "barbarians." It is often associated specifically with horseback riders from the steppes to the north and west of the Central Plains.

TIMEKEEPING: For much of Chinese history, time was measured in two-hour increments, starting at 11:00 p.m. The hours in this system are zi, chou, yin, mao, chen, si, wu, wei, shen, you, xu, and hai.

Timeline of Historical Events

QIN DYNASTY (221–206 BCE): The first official dynasty of China that scholars can agree upon. Everything before this (the Three Emperors and Five Sovereigns, the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties) is considered mytho-historical. Qin Shihuang was the first emperor, and the dynasty only lasted through his son before it fell.

CHU-HAN CONTENTION (206–202 BCE): Technically composed of two parts—the Eighteen Kingdoms, during which warlords fought for the right to rule, and the Chu-Han period, during which the Chu and Han kingdoms, led by Xiang Yu and Liu Bang respectively, fought. Liu Bang won the decisive Battle of Gaixia in 202 BCE, thus ending the conflict.

HAN DYNASTY (202 BCE–220 CE): Established by Liu Bang. It was considered a golden age, and the "Han" name was passed down to the people, the language, and the culture that stemmed from it.

THREE KINGDOMS (220–280 CE): A period of conflict where three main kingdoms—Wei (ruled by the Cao family), Wu (ruled by the Sun family), and Shu (ruled by the Liu family)—fought for the right to rule. The conflict technically began with the end of the Han dynasty, with many warlords fighting for the upper hand, but eventually settled into these three factions.

WESTERN JIN DYNASTY (266–316 CE): Ruled by the Sima dynasty, who ended the Three Kingdoms era in 280 CE after officially conquering Eastern Wu.

WAR OF THE EIGHT PRINCES (291–306 CE): A war fought between eight princes of the Western Jin dynasty, all with the family name Sima, over who would be the regent during the reign of Emperor Hui. The aftermath led to the era of the Sixteen Kingdoms in the north and the reign of the Eastern Jin dynasty in the south.

UPRISING OF THE FIVE HU (304–316 CE): This took place in conjunction with the War of the Eight Princes. The combination of all this fighting eventually led to the downfall of the Western Jin dynasty.

SIXTEEN KINGDOMS/STATES (304–439 CE): An era in the north where sixteen kingdoms, ruled by a quick succession of Hu and Han both, came and went. The term “Sixteen Kingdoms” is often used in conjunction with the Five Hu, due to the significant role that the Hu played during this time. The dominant kingdom during the time period of *Dinghai Fusheng Records* is the Qin state, led by Fu Jian. (Fu Jian’s dynasty is known as the Former Qin in historiographical settings to distinguish it from other, later dynasties also named Qin, but at the time it would have simply been referred to as Qin.)

EASTERN JIN DYNASTY (317–420 CE): The period *Dinghai Fusheng Records* is set in. During this period, the two main forces were the Eastern Jin Dynasty in the south and the Qin Dynasty in the north.

Footnotes

Chapter 1

[1] 太元 Taiyuan: the reigning period of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, spanning twenty years from 376 to 396 AD. The fourth year is year 379.

[2] An old name for China.

Chapter 2

[3] “Hu” is a historical exonym for ancient non-Chinese peoples who immigrated to northern China. There are two factions of Hu in the era in which this novel takes place: the Sixteen Hu and the Five Hu.

[4] Supernatural beings, ghosts, and spirits, similar to the term “yokai” in Japanese.

[5] A term for regions beyond the western reaches of the Great Wall.

[6] From “Scripture of the Way and its Virtue.”

[7] The reign of Emperor Huai of Jin (307–313 AD).

[8] An old name for Nanjing.

[9] Also known as Shi Min, a military leader during the Sixteen Kingdoms era and the only emperor of the short-lived state of Ran Wei.

[10] A demon from Buddhist mythology associated with darkness and death.

Chapter 3

[11] An archaic name for the planet Jupiter.

[12] A li is approximately a quarter of a mile at this point in history.

[13] The War of the Eight Princes (八王之乱) was a series of civil wars fought between AD 291 and 306 over regency for the developmentally disabled Emperor Hui.

[14] An actual building (and now tourist attraction) in what used to be Xiangyang.

[15] 雅言 The earliest common language in China, as Mandarin is the common language in modern China.

Chapter 4

[16] A term for the community of martial artists who operate outside of conventional law and order.

[17] 道: The way/path, a philosophical component of Daoism; everyone has their own dao (path) to walk.

Chapter 5

[18] A friendly term with which to address a younger person, similar in vibe to “my bro.”

Chapter 6

[19] “Xiandi” is a respectful term of address for a younger man the speaker isn’t particularly close to. It is archaic in modern Chinese.

[20] 11:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m.

Chapter 9

[21] These are real historical figures; Liu Bang, or Emperor Gaozu, was the first emperor of the Han dynasty.

Chapter 11

[22] This Fu Jian’s name is not actually the same as the Fu Jian who has already been introduced; the senior, deceased Fu Jian’s name is written as 苻健, and the name of his nephew and the current emperor is written as 苻堅.

Chapter 12

[23] A song originating from the ancient peoples of the Yangtze River valley, translated into Chinese by Liu Xiang in the Garden of Stories in the first century BCE.

[24] An anthology of Chinese poems that were likely written at some point during the Han dynasty (202 BCE –220 CE).

[25] Meaning “Phoenix.” An emperor is represented by the dragon, and his empress is often represented by a phoenix.

[26] The highest military commander in the nation.

Chapter 14

[27] Hun (魂) and po (魄) are the two types of soul a living human possesses; the three hun souls are yang and leave the body after death, and the seven po souls are yin and remain with the corpse.

[28] 9:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m.

Chapter 15

[29] An ancient counting system, also known as the sexagenary cycle when used to count years. Five stems (the five elements) and twelve branches are combined for a total of sixty parts.

[30] A mythical beast of unclear depiction, said to be as fierce as a tiger but with a vegetarian diet.

Chapter 22

[31] A term for the underworld.

[32] 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.

Chapter 23

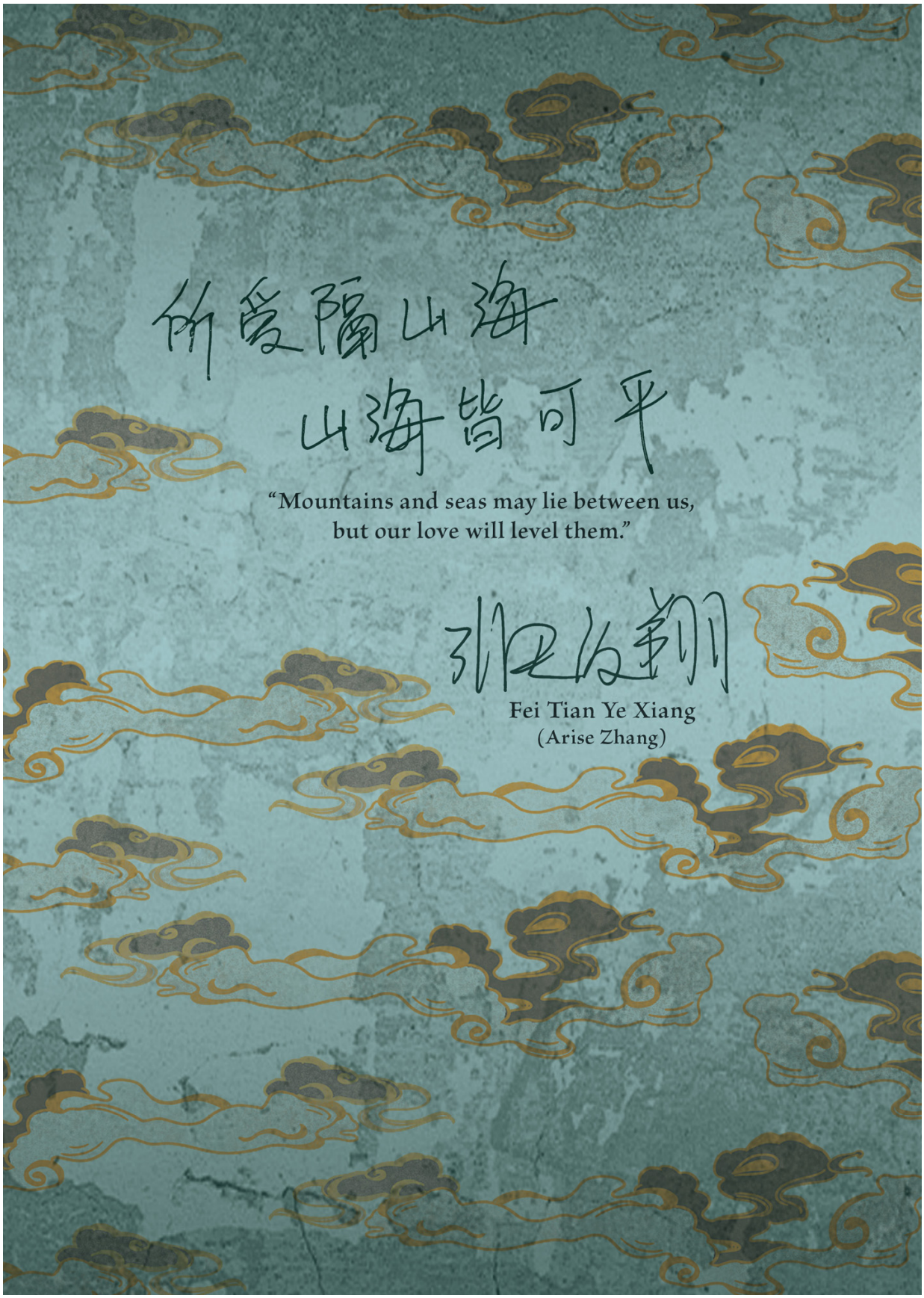
[33] From 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

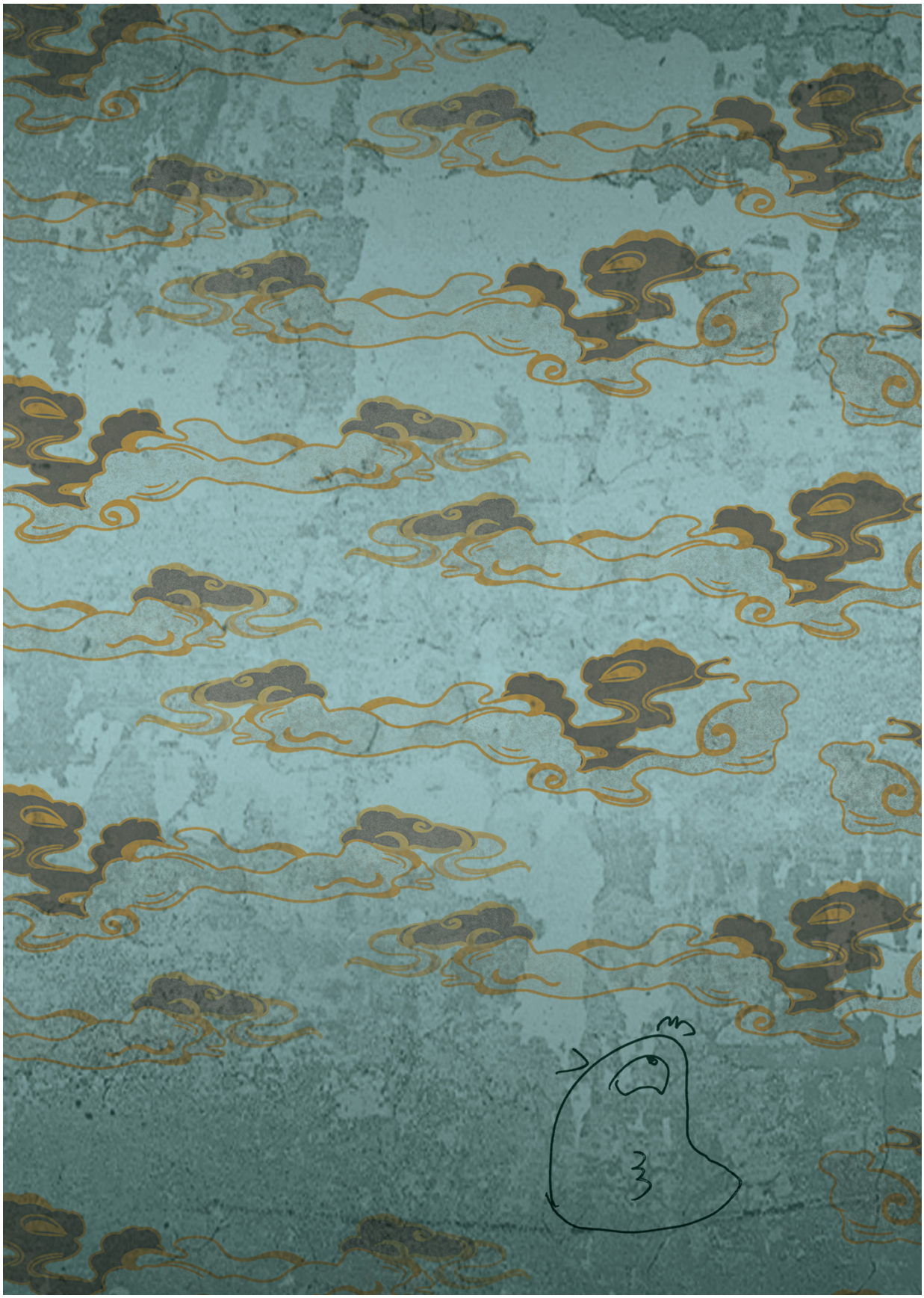
Chapter 24

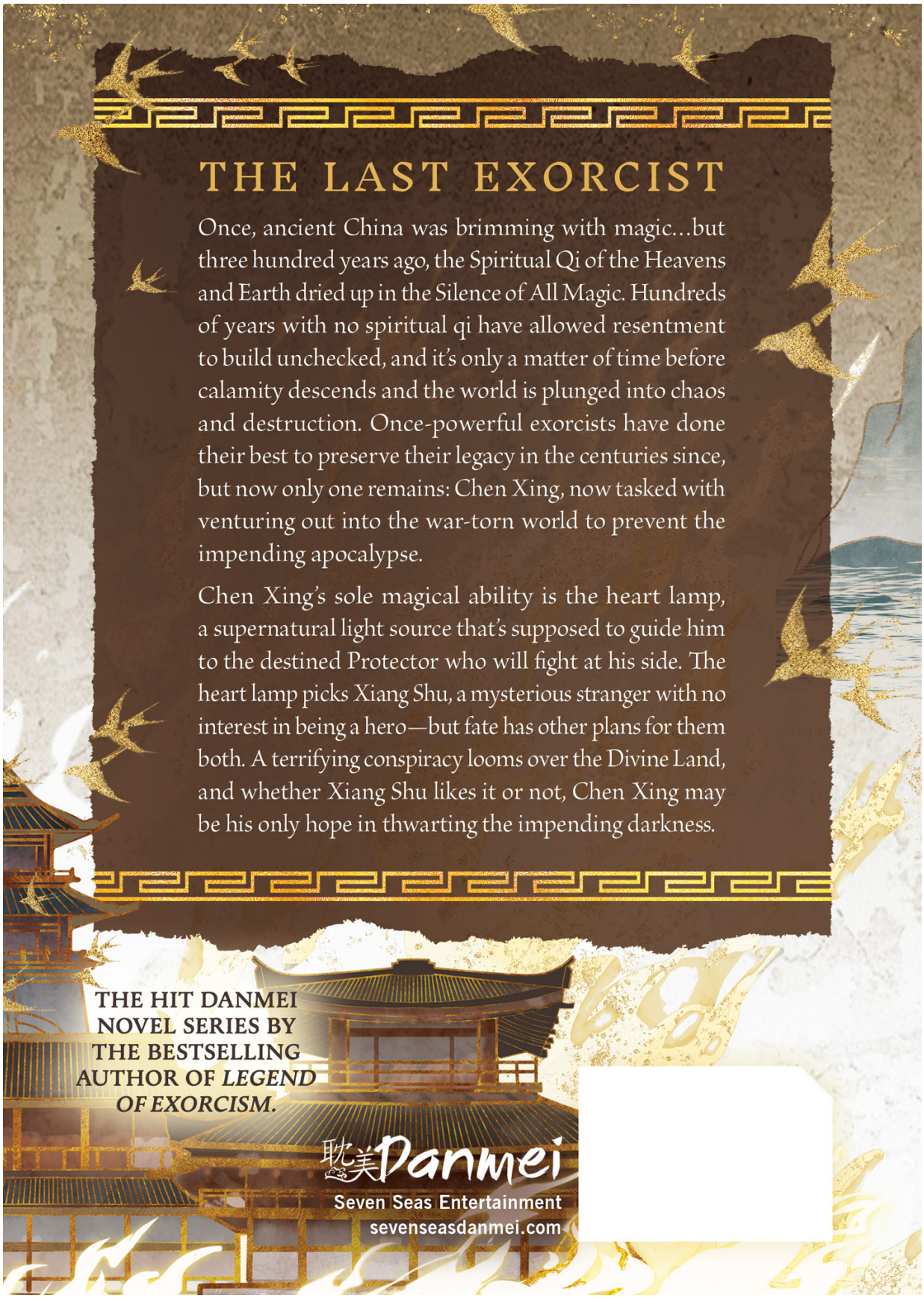
[34] Qin Shihuang, the first emperor of China.

Chapter 26

[35] Saibei is an old term for the land beyond the Great Wall.


纵爱隔山海
山海皆可平
"Mountains and seas may lie between us,
but our love will level them."
非天夜翔
Fei Tian Ye Xiang
(Arise Zhang)




THE LAST EXORCIST
Once, ancient China was brimming with magic...but three hundred years ago, the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth dried up in the Silence of All Magic. Hundreds of years with no spiritual qi have allowed resentment to build unchecked, and it's only a matter of time before calamity descends and the world is plunged into chaos and destruction. Once-powerful exorcists have done their best to preserve their legacy in the centuries since, but now only one remains: Chen Xing, now tasked with venturing out into the war-torn world to prevent the impending apocalypse.
Chen Xing's sole magical ability is the heart lamp, a supernatural light source that's supposed to guide him to the destined Protector who will fight at his side. The heart lamp picks Xiang Shu, a mysterious stranger with no interest in being a hero—but fate has other plans for them both. A terrifying conspiracy looms over the Divine Land, and whether Xiang Shu likes it or not, Chen Xing may be his only hope in thwarting the impending darkness.
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